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The Street Arab's Blind; or, SCOOPING THE SWINDLER SHARPS.

BY JO PIERCE.



"THIN OUT AV THE HOUSE YE GO, KIDS AN' ALL," SHOUTED MR. MCFAGEN. JOE'S FACE WAS THE PICTURE OF WOE.

The Street Arab's Blind;

OR.

Scooping the Swindler Sharps.

A Story of Unlucky Joe's New York Life.

BY JO PIERCE.

CHAPTER I

THE STREET WAIF'S MISFORTUNE

It was not Marius among the ruins of Carthage, but a small and ragged street-boy among the ruins of what had been as important to him as the ancient city was to the old Roman.

The scene was a busy thoroughfare of New York, with vehicles of all kinds moving along the street; with trains of the Elevated Road grinding and rumbling along overhead; with many persons hurrying along the sidewalks like gigantic bees of commercial life.

The boy received no notice. A little while before he had been surrounded by a small crowd, but in our great metropolis all men are busy, and useless curiosity can hold them but a short time during hours of labor.

But the boy had lost his means of labor, and there were tears in his eyes, and traces of other tears upon his cheeks as he stood and looked at divers splinters of wood and fragments of glass scattered at his feet.

An elderly man advanced to his side, anon. "You seem to be in trouble, young man," he observed, kindly.

The youth looked at him stolidly.

"I be," he agreed, almost indifferently.

"What is the cause?"

"It's broke."

And the boy looked at the fragments.

"What was it?"

"A ship."

"A ship?"

"Toy! Model of a full-rigged ship, in a glass box."

"Did you drop it?"

"Pole of a wagon smashed it."

"Where is the wagon?"

"Dunno; drove off."

The boy's answers were brief to an extreme, and little less than ungracious.

"Were you carrying the toy-ship along the street?" pursued the questioner.

"No; it stood here."

"On exhibition?"

"Yes."

"Ah! I see. Belong to your parents?"

For answer the boy picked a piece of paste-board up from the sidewalk. He held it up, and several letters and words became revealed on its surface, rudely spelled:

"PROPERTY OF A BLIND WOMAN!"

It was not hard to understand, and the investigator nodded quickly.

"I see. A blind woman depended upon the receipts from the toy-ship, obtained by exhibition, for a living, and it's now destroyed by an accident."

"I've showed it 'round town fur several weeks, an' got some money, fur it was a beauty! But the wagon came up fast, an' the pole run inter the ship. Now, you kin see w'ot's left."

It was but little.

The once-dainty craft was a hopeless ruin!

"I told her at the beginnin' that t'wa'n't no use," muttered the boy, "an' she was foolish ter trust it to anybody as unlucky as me."

"So you're not fortunate?"

"Unlucky Joe, they calls me."

"Why?"

"Cause I deserves it. I've had a pooty tough row ter hoe. Both my parients died in an epidemic, an' I've had ter git on all alone ever since I's eight years old—that's six years ago. I've tried everything, but t'wa'n't no use: I'm yoked up with Adversity, an' he's a stronger ox nor I be." When I took out the ship, I tol' her it wouldn't never prosper under my care."

Unlucky Joe had run his hands down into his pockets deeply, and, while making his rambling none-too-coherent speech, had been looking down again at the wreck of the ship.

He made a picture hard to understand from mere description. According to his own statement he was fourteen years old, but he was small of stature. Poverty, like adversity, was his yoke-mate. It showed in his old clothes, which, despite repeated, bungling patching, were bursting out into rags.

There was about him an air painful to see in any one, and doubly so in one so young. The stolid manner he so frequently exhibited was the shadow of a crushed spirit. Good fortune and

Charity had passed him by, and Faith and Hope abode not with him. Robbed by poverty of the three Graces, he was in a dangerous mood.

That he was not criminal had been owing partly to innate honor, and partly to fortuitous circumstances which had thrown restraining influences around him at critical stages of his young life.

If he was ever forced to meet a crisis without these restraining influences, would the innate honor save him?

It was an open question, but, crushed by misfortune, he was in a state of rebellion against man, and his sullen apathy, seen at times, was fruitful soil for the sowing of dangerous seeds.

The old man who had thus conversed with him could not fail to read some part of this, and he remained silent and read for some time before he spoke again.

"So you relied upon this toy-ship for support?"

"Yis."

"Anybody else?"

"The blind woman an' her children."

"Who is she?"

"Mrs. Electa Baldwin. The ship was hers. Sence she's got blind she can't sew, an' she an' the babies got poorer an' poorer, an' I was out o' work; an' she said as how I could take the ship—it was made by her husband, who went away ter sea an' was lost—I could take it an' exhibit it on the streets, an' see ef charitable folks would give us means o' livin'. That was three months ago, an' I've kept her an' her babies in food, but the ship is gone now!"

Fresh tears rolled down the boy's cheeks, but he suddenly brushed them away fiercely, straightened his figure and exclaimed with boyish pride:

"I don't keer fur myself, fur I kin sleep on a board an' eat dry bread, but what will she an' the kids do?"

"Where do they live?"

"On Hudson street."

"Is she totally blind?"

"Yis."

"I would like to see her. I am a physician, and I may be able to say something in regard to her blindness. Some cases are curable; hers may be of that character."

"All right."

Unlucky Joe did not make the indifferent reply until his discerning eyes had studied the stranger's face. In that face, and in its owner's voice, he saw no great cause for hope. Neither was sympathetic; neither was promising. Still, if the man was a physician, his help was not to be disdained—though Joe believed Electa Baldwin's blindness to be incurable.

"Lead the way," the doctor added.

Joe obeyed. There was nothing left of the ship worth saving, and he did not take any fragment. Instead, with empty hands and pockets, but with a heavy heart, he piloted the stranger.

The boy went ahead; the man walked directly behind him. Joe did not once look around to see if he was being followed. That same stolid air continued which sat so heavily upon his young shoulders.

In due time Hudson street was reached. The particular house to which Joe led was like thousands of other houses in the city. Built of brick, it had grown old and rusty as the metropolis grew old, and all signs of humble life were discernible in it.

The stranger quickened his steps and gained his guide's side.

"Say to the blind lady," he directed, "that I am Doctor Jason Blackstone, an eye specialist."

"You kin say it," Joe answered, phlegmatically.

He opened the door, went in and led the way to a room on the third floor. He knocked, and the door was at once opened by a bright-eyed boy of about five years.

"Josey!"

The name was quickly uttered, and the bright eyes grew brighter, but the speaker suddenly caught sight of Doctor Blackstone, paused and shrunk back.

"What! my little man, are you afraid of me?"

So questioned the doctor, but the "little man" made no reply. Instead, he beat further retreat, and found refuge by the side of a sad-faced woman in black.

Entered Unlucky Joe, with his hands in his pockets, and his face the picture of woe.

"I tol' yer not ter trust the ship ter me," he remarked, abruptly. "I knowed trouble would

come on't, an' it has; it's broke all up, the ship is; an' not a fragment left on't!"

"You are jesting," answered the lady, but there was anxiety in her voice.

"No, I ain't."

"The ship is broken, you say?"

"Yes."

"How did it happen?"

"A wagon-driver hit it a rap with the pole ter his wagon, an' smashed it into bits."

He looked only at the floor as he spoke. Mrs. Baldwin confronted him, dismay pictured in her face. Blackstone regarded her with strange intentness, but finally moved forward and spoke:

"Madam, you will excuse me, but I have come home with Joe."

The blind woman started.

"And who are you, sir?" she asked.

"My name is Blackstone."

"I do not remember you."

"You never saw me before. I am a physician, and, I trust, a humane man. Hearing that you are painfully afflicted, I have ventured to call and ask leave to examine your eyes. Sometimes blindness may be cured by an operation. Of course I cannot say how it is with your case until I have investigated, but this I can say: Providence hath willed that we make ourselves useful one to another, and nothing would please me better than to be of service to one so afflicted."

Mrs. Baldwin had followed his speech closely.

"I have no money with which to pay you, sir," she answered.

"Money I do not need, and I should be ashamed to take it from the poor. I only wish I had the hands and time to go to all the poor of New York!"

This worthy sentiment was expressed in a voice slightly unsteady, and the color rose suddenly to Electa Baldwin's face. There had been times when she hoped—even thought—that sight was not lost to her forever, although the only doctor she had consulted had said there was no hope.

She knew he had not been a skillful physician, and hope now returned.

"You are very kind," she faltered.

"I do my duty only."

Unlucky Joe had become interested. It was a severe blow to him that he should have been deprived of the article that gave a livelihood to it Electa and her children, and he brooded over it in his own downcast way; but it now occurred to him that other responsibilities were upon him.

"Got a diplomet?" he abruptly asked.

"A what?"

"Diplomet—s'tiffykit."

"Oh! diploma. Certainly, I have one, but I don't carry it around in my pocket."

"Be you sure you won't do no harm ter her?"

"Oh! he wouldn't do that!" Mrs. Baldwin exclaimed.

"Rest easy, my young man; I know my profession well. Whether I do good or not, I promise to do no harm. In any case, I have no instruments here, and can only make an examination. Pray come to the light, madam."

Mrs. Baldwin obeyed.

"I hope I can help you. I believe you are a widow."

"My husband was lost at sea," sighed the widow.

"A sailor, eh?"

"Yes, sir."

"Named Warren Baldwin?"

"No, sir; Wilbur Baldwin."

"How did I get the name of Warren into my mind? Perhaps you said that was your maiden name?"

"No. I was an Alliston."

"Um! I perceive. Now, bend a little this way."

Whatever motive actuated Doctor Jason Blackstone, he was not indifferent. Ever since he entered the room he had been using his eyes sharply. He looked at Electa and at her children with minute attention, and his small, keen eyes transformed themselves into interrogation points flung dagger-like out of his mind.

And when he had led Mrs. Baldwin to the light, his gaze seemed, figuratively, to absorb, not the aspect of her sightless eyes, but that of her face.

CHAPTER II.

WARNED OUT.

JASON BLACKSTONE was not the only person who was using his eyes.

Unlucky Joe was doing his share.

The yoke-mate of misfortune was very much interested in Mrs. Baldwin, and when he saw her case assume such an aspect, he was eagerness personified. His usual stolidity was so swept away that he seemed like a different boy. If Blackstone was a capable doctor, great developments might follow. If Mrs. Baldwin could be cured—happy possibility!—the future of herself and her children would undergo a vast change.

The close watch kept by Joe was productive of one result, at once: he decided that Doctor Blackstone was a peculiar man.

He noticed how that person's gaze wandered—noticed that, while making a show of looking to Electa's eyes, only, he surveyed her whole face, and did not let his gaze rest at all.

Long experience with adversity sharpens one's wits, and renders him quick to feel suspicion—often too quick. Now, Joe grew suspicious of Doctor Jason Blackstone. He knew but little about physicians, but common sense told him that one deeply interested in his profession would give thought to that only.

"He's a 'snide'," thought Joe, in the expressive language of the streets.

Blackstone fell back a step.

"I am very sorry, madam," he remarked, in a voice apparently filled with corresponding regret, "but I must give an unfavorable report."

Electa sighed.

"I am not surprised," she answered.

"In practicing medicine I have often been called to observe the strength of woman's fortitude. Man, when ill, becomes a petulant child; woman rises to the plane of heroism. I trust that you will be able to bear your cross."

"You have told me no more than I believed before," was the patient response.

"Your affliction is of the worst type known to my profession. I will not trouble you with medical technicalities, but simply say that the sight-giving principle is utterly destroyed. Thus, the most remarkable oculist in the world would be unable to give you even partial relief."

"I could bear it patiently were it not for my children."

"You are poor?"

"Yes."

"Unhappy lot!" sighed Jason, sympathetically.

Electa was silent.

"Have you no relatives?" he asked, after a pause.

"No, sir."

"Not even on your husband's side of the house?"

"My husband had relations, but I do not know where they are."

Electa answered with an air which indicated that some secret lay back of the non-committal reply, and Blackstone did not press the point.

"You shall be taken care of!" he declared.

"My professional work has been among the wealthy classes, and I have the confidence and co-operation of many benevolent men and women. May I ask if you find it hard to meet expenses here?"

The blind woman's face clouded.

"We cannot meet them."

"Are you behind in that respect?"

"We owe for rent. This house was recently sold. The former landlord had been kind—too kind, perhaps, for his own good, for he allowed us to run up a bill that has not been paid yet. The new possessor, Mrs. McFagan, waited three weeks, and seemed to be a very good woman, but she finally took to drink and declared that we must leave. It was then that I thought to send Joseph out with the ship, and the result was that we more than paid expenses. I would not overlook an old landlord, and I gave him part of our savings. As a result, that debt is half-paid, but we owe our landlady ten dollars."

The speaker paused, a deeper shadow appeared on her face, and she regretfully added:

"The exhibition of the ship was so successful that I thought we should pay her up this week, but—"

"But you hadn't ought ter trusted in me!" interrupted Joe, almost fiercely. "Didn't I tell ye no good luck ever went along with me? All I hev ter do with is a dead failure, an' everybody knows it. You valued the ship, an' now it's gone ter smash. You hadn't ought ter trusted it ter me!"

"Joseph!" was the reproving reply.

"I don't keer: yer know it's so."

"I am glad it was the ship that received the blow, not you."

"But I ain't! I ought ter got 'it, fur I'm no good—"

"Joseph!"

"Wal, you know—"

"I know how good your heart is, and that Providence will one day bring you out of your troubles into the light of success."

Unlucky Joe hung his head. He was always ashamed of his fierce outbursts when Electa reproved him in her gentle way. She stood between him and danger. When he was desperate and driven to the wall, a few words from her would quell his rebellious spirit.

Blackstone had been observing both Joe and Mrs. Baldwin attentively.

"Be at ease, both of you," he advised. "I am going to speak of you to the charitable persons of whom I made mention, and I know them well enough to be sure that they will care for you."

"When I think of my children, I cannot feel the will to refuse charity," Electa answered.

"And I presume that if the benevolent ladies offer you a new home, where you will be free from all embarrassments and annoyances incident to poverty, you will not refuse?"

"I cannot refuse."

"Enough!"

Blackstone moved toward the door.

"I must go now to attend an aged lady who suffers from rheumatism, in whom the benevolent ladies have a great interest. They pay all bills. I go, but your case shall be laid before them within an hour."

So saying, Mr. Blackstone left the room.

Mrs. Baldwin clasped her young daughter in her arms.

"Kind Providence, I thank thee for this ray of hope!" she murmured, gratefully.

There was a brief silence; then she added:

"Joseph, don't you rejoice with me?"

"Ye-ah," was the doubtful answer.

"The doctor is a noble man."

Joe said nothing.

"He comes like an angel of mercy," Electa added.

"I didn't see no wings!" abruptly, almost fiercely declared Joe.

"Surely, you are not prejudiced against him?"

"I think he's a snide!"

"Joseph!"

"I've figgered him up, an' I don't see no good in him. I don't like him! There's somethin' crooked an' evil in that man. I don't b'lieve he's no doctor, nohow."

"Why should you doubt it?"

"He didn't look like one."

"That is no proof."

"Wal, I don't keer; I think he's a rascal. I didn't take no great notice on him, at first, but I did later. My advice is, don't you trust yer-self an' the children ter him. That's evil in his heart, or I ain't got no eyes."

"Why should he intend evil to those as humble as we are?"

"Dunno."

"I think you wrong him. His voice and manner were kind and gentle—"

"I don't keer; he's a rascal!"

Joe spoke with the force of a strong mind in its conviction, and Electa sighed and let the matter drop. She regarded the boy's outbreak as one of the many she had heard from him, and, really, gave no serious thought to the vague charge against Jason Blackstone.

They were interrupted by a heavy knock on the door, and then Mr. McFagan, the landlord, appeared.

He occupied the suite of rooms below, appearing in Electa's room at this hour, apparently in a great rage, and without hat or coat.

And on this occasion Mr. McFagan squared away like a prize-fighter, and spoke ponderously.

"I've come for me money?"

"Your money?" faltered Electa.

"Me rint-money."

"I am very sorry, Mr. McFagan—"

"An' phat good does that do me? Ye're always 'very sorry!' Does that putt money in me pocket?"

"Mr. McFagan, we hope—"

"Divil a bit do Oi care phat ye hope. Hev ye the money?"

"No; but we expect—"

"Thin out av the house ye go, bag an' baggage, kids an' all. Oi've herrud how the ship is broke, an' know ye can't earrun anny more tin. That stittles it. This is not a horse-pittle, begorra, an' I won't harbor thim that can't worruk. Oi hev me own livin' ter git."

"Your beer, ye mean!" retorted Joe.

"Hoity-toity! An' so you are alive, megallow-

bird! That's phat you are, an' phat you'll come to. Moind, now, Oi know jest how you're built, an' Oi say you'll end on the gallows. Moind that, will ye?"

"I won't end with the jim-jams!"

"You'll end wid a slap in de jaw!"

"Joseph," tremulously spoke Mrs. Baldwin, "I beg that you will not talk so. Mr. McFagan, I know you have long borne with us—"

"As long as Oi will."

"Truly, we will try—"

"To b'ate me out uv me rint. No, ye won't; not ef Murphy McFagan knows himself. Talk is ch'ape, but rint is dear; the wan won't pay the ither. Hush up now, an' give me niver a wurrud more. Will ye move out?"

"We have nowhere to go."

"The str'ate is a good sixty feet wide, an' it's several miles long. We'll see if it ain't roomy enough fur you an' yer kids. Out av this house ye go before the sun sets, an' don't ye forgit it. Oi'll hev the men here ter throw out yer traps at jist half-past foive begorra."

With this parting threat, the man turned and went out, staggering under his load of liquor, and slamming the door after him as if he was thereby giving his backward tenants a fresh blow.

The helpless little company were left alone—left to face the fact that they might soon be tenants of the street.

CHAPTER III.

A STRANGE MAN IN NUMBER 3.

TWENTY minutes later, Unlucky Joe entered a house on a certain street half a dozen blocks away. He was making a last effort to save Mrs. Baldwin and her children from being cast into the street.

Electa, confronted with the probability of immediate trouble, no longer looked to Blackstone for help, and Joe had never had faith in him; but she had remembered an acquaintance of happier days, and sent Joe to see if an asylum could not be had for a short time.

The boy entered the house, mounted to the third floor and knocked at a door on which was painted a huge figure "3."

"Come in!" called a deep, hoarse voice, and Joe obeyed promptly.

He saw a room in great confusion, with a little old man sitting in it whose hair and beard almost made a blanket for him. The latter reached to his waist; the former flowed down over his shoulders in a tangled, kinky sheet.

The sight was so strange that Joe paused and looked at him in wondering silence.

"Tongue!" cried the old man, fiercely.

"Hey?" returned Joe, blankly.

"Use your tongue, I say."

"Does Mrs. Wilson live here?"

"No."

"Where does she live?"

"None of my business!"

"She lived here three year ago—"

"None of my business! I've lived here two years, and don't care a rap for Mrs. W. Tongue!"

"Hey?"

"Use your tongue!"

Joe thought that he had fallen in with a madman, and was ready to get away as soon as possible. He noticed in a vague way that the little old man had in his lap the miniature keel of a ship, some three feet long, and this was certainly a sign peaceable enough, but his manner was quite the reverse. He snapped at Joe like a dog, glared at him like an angry lion, and looked ready to spring upon him like a tiger. In fact, he was a whole menagerie in himself, and on the war-path.

"I'd like ter find Mrs. Wilson," Joe admitted.

"None of my business! Don't know where she is. Tongue, or get out!"

Joe decided that he would "get out." He turned toward the door, but, as he did so, paused in fresh wonder.

He had always regarded the miniature ship which he had exhibited on the street as a great and novel thing, but, before him, he saw a score of ships, all very much like it; all in glass cases. It was a view so strange and unexpected that he stood and looked in silence until the old man's voice broke in again:

"Tongue!"

"Oh, I'm goin'," Joe answered.

"Tongue, I say! What d'ye think of them?"

"They're great!" Joe admitted.

"Ha!"

The old man broke into a chuckle as grim as his wrath had been strong.

"Never saw anything like them, eh?"

"Yes, I hev."

"Oh! Where?"

"I've been round with one; had it on exhibit, an' should be goin' now ef it hadn't been fur my measly luck."

"I don't see."

"Had it on exhibit in the streets, so that folks could drop in their money ter make it pay. 'Twas ter support them an' keep them from starvin'; but a wagon-pole hit it, an' smashed it all ter bits, so it was lost. 'Twa'n't ter be wondered at, fur it was jest w'ot always comes ter me."

This disconnected explanation did not explain much, but the old man did not ask for further particulars.

"Like the sea?" he asked, abruptly.

"I ain't never seen any of it, only down at the Battery."

"Huh!" was the disdainful reply. "A mere wash-basin full of water; no sea about that. Like a ship?"

"Yes; w'ot I've seen on 'em."

A disturbance in the next room interrupted the conversation and frightened Joe not a little. There was a snarl which sounded like that of a wild animal, the sound of a leap by some object, and then a human cry of terror.

Joe stood in open-eyed expectancy. Had he run into a menagerie, and was one of the creatures thereof about to kill somebody?

It seemed so, for he heard a struggle behind the wall, but not any more cries. The little old man moved toward the connecting door with an air of impatience.

"Wait for me; I'll return in a moment," he directed.

He opened the door and passed through. Joe was alone. He was disturbed not only for the person who had cried out in alarm but for himself, yet he did not think of retreating. He was interested in the matter of which he knew so little but could suspect so much, and, waiting, he listened with eager attention.

He heard the little old man's voice in peevish reproof, as he reprimanded some one or something, and then another voice arose in a frightened key which was almost a wail:

"I shall be killed here!"

If there was any reply Joe did not hear it, nor did any further distinct words come from the other room. While he was still listening, the old man suddenly returned.

Joe expected to receive a suspicious, questioning glance, but his host was as calm as ever.

"What's your name?" he asked, abruptly.

"Joseph Eldwin."

"Business?"

"I ain't got any sence my ship was broke."

"Want another?"

"Want another?"

"That's what I said. Don't stare at me like a stick. Speak up! Show some life!"

"I haven't any money ter buy."

"Buy? Who said anything about buying? Silence, or I'll cast you down the stairs. Don't dare to dictate terms to me!"

"I ain't dictated," he returned, sulkily.

"Would you take one of my ships and go out as you did before?"

"You bet!"

Joe's eyes brightened. He did not stop to think that the little old man might impose terms so hard that only himself would be the gainer; the boy thought only of helping his friends.

"Come here to-morrow. I'll think of it; don't know what I'll do. Strange step for me, if I take it. I may not; may throw you down the stairs. Tongue!"

"Yes, sir," said Joe.

"Come to-morrow. Card! Go!"

He thrust a bit of pasteboard into Joe's hand, and then shoved him toward the door with considerable roughness. The moment that the boy was outside the door was banged to, and a clicking sound told that it had been locked.

Joe was too much confused to resist this summary course, even if he had wished to. But he did not. The old man was eccentric to an extreme, but in the whirlpool of his oddity existed the fact that he had thrown out some hope of employment. It was a chance Joe could not neglect, and he submitted to the old man's whims quietly.

Once on the street he looked at the card which had been given him.

Upon it was written something in a sprawling hand, and this is what he read:

"JOAB BALDWIN,

"Neptune, Crank and Philosopher. Office, where he pleases; hours, twenty-four in a day. Selah!"

Joe gazed in bewilderment. At first he could make absolutely nothing out of this strange array of words, but one fact gradually grew upon him.

The name, Joab Baldwin, strangely recalled that of the blind woman.

Was it chance, or something more, that their surnames were alike?

The question was so interesting that Joe would have returned to Joab's quarters if he had not realized how useless it would be to seek the old man before the specified time.

He kept on toward Mrs. Baldwin's, and soon forgot Joab. He had immediate trouble to contend with. He had failed to find Electa's friend, and they were menaced with the danger of being thrown into the street. Only a very short time remained. What was to be done to avert the calamity?

The boy felt that if help was had it must come through some device of his own, and, the problem being hard to an extreme, he was so deep in thought that his movements were purely mechanical. He gave no heed to where he went until he found himself at the tenement-house door.

No light had he yet obtained on the question of what they were to do, but seeing nothing else to do, he dragged his unwilling feet up the stairs.

He entered Mrs. Baldwin's room. The voices of the children did not greet him as usual, and the glance which he swept around failed to discover any member of the family. He was alone.

Alarm flashed upon him. Just what their absence indicated was not certain, but he knew very well that some disaster had occurred.

CHAPTER IV.

JOE'S FRIENDS ARE MISSING.

FOR some time Joe hesitated, unable to account for the disappearance of Mrs. Baldwin and her children, but the necessity of prompt action soon became apparent. He turned toward the door, and was just in time to meet a neighbor who lived on the same floor.

"Mrs. Haile, where's my frien's gone?" he demanded, quickly.

"Don't the card say?"

"What card?"

"The one on the table."

The woman moved forward, looked, and then turned to Joe, again.

"Have you got it?—the card I mean."

"I ain't seen no card."

"But he put it on the table."

"Who did?"

"The man that took Electa and her children away. I don't know who he was."

"How'd he look?"

"He was tall and slender; wore black clothes and looked very serious, same like a minister. And I noticed he was cross-eyed in one eye."

"Jason Blackstone!" Joe exclaimed.

"You know him, then?"

"I've seen him. Didn't ye hear Electa say where they was a-goin' to?"

"No. I didn't know about it until just as they were going, and then when I happened upon them, and asked if she was going out, she said she was. The man laid a card on the table, and said he had written on it, and that it would explain if any one called to see Mrs. Baldwin while she was away. Is anything wrong?"

"How long did she say she was goin' ter be gone?"

"She didn't say, but I thought it was only for a little while."

"Be you sure the man left a card there?"

"Yes."

"Then where is it?"

"I can't imagine. I saw him put it down on the table, and then he went out with Electa."

During the latter part of this conversation a child of the neighbor had been listening, and he now volunteered some information!

"He come back an' got it."

"Got what? Who come back?"

"The man come, an' he got the card an' took it away; I seen him!" declared the child.

On being questioned further the speaker stated that the man had accompanied Mrs. Baldwin and her children to a hack that was waiting outside, and had then left them, came quickly and quietly up the stairs, entered Mrs. Baldwin's room, secured the card, put it in his pocket and hastened back to the hack, after which he and the Baldwins were driven away.

"It's all a measly plot!" cried Joe, fiercely, joubling up his hands with the instinctive feeling that he would like to get at Jason Blackstone. "He's abductionized them!"

"Who has?"

"That's what I don't know, nor why he's done it. He may call hisself a doctor, but I b'lieve he's a snake come ter do tawm ter

Electa an' the children. He's a secret enemy, he is!"

"But she went with him willingly."

"She's been fooled; that's what is the matter. The poor critter is blind, an' she couldn't look on his face an' see that 'twas a snake's face."

Turning suddenly, the boy went down to the street and found a Directory in a drug-store. There he looked for Dr. Jason Blackstone's name. As he had expected he found nothing of the kind, and another item of evidence was obtained against the pretended Samaritan.

Joe was confident that he had abducted Electa and her children, but what the motive had been he could not surmise.

He went back to the empty room and stood looking around until, recollecting that the landlady had threatened to clear out the place if the Baldwins' rent was not paid at once, he saw the need of averting that calamity.

There was but little in the room, and, now that no human beings were to be housed, he thought that the friendly neighbor might take the goods in, so that Mrs. McFagan could not have them thrown into the street.

He spoke to the neighbor, and the result was that the goods were transferred to her rooms.

Joe went to the street again. He no longer had a roof to cover him, nor any friend to whom he could turn. Even a houseless cat he might have envied, for the cat could sleep under a stoop, but if Joe tried that last resort, he might get arrested for his attempt to lie down somewhere.

He gave no thought to this, but stood on the sidewalk and kept up a spiritless, hopeless watch for his friends until darkness fell.

They did not come, and he had no clew to where they had gone. Probably Blackstone had taken great care to make his trail too blind to be followed.

His trick to deceive Mrs. Baldwin, and make her think he had left a card when he had left none was ample proof against him, and the fact that he had taken even Electa's children into consideration—she could not have told whether he left a card at all or not—was proof that he considered the matter one of great importance.

"He's her enemy, but why?"

Again and again the boy turned the question over in his mind, but he could find no satisfactory reply to it.

Electa was poor, and Blackstone seemed to be well off in a worldly sense. Why should he be her enemy, or care what became of her, anyway?

The faint hope that something favorable might occur, after all, kept Joe in the street until the folly of waiting any longer became apparent.

"Reckon I may as well strike out fur myself, as it needs some middlin' tall hustlin' ter git food an' boudoir fur me ter-night. Lucky I'm clad in raiment fit fur all 'margencies!"

He looked down at his dilapidated garments with a spice of grim pleasantry wholly foreign to him.

"Couldn't go ter the Casino, ter an opererry, nor ter the Four Hundred's ball, but I've seen wuss clo'se nor them—seen 'em in a rag-bag!"

Finding consolation in the fact that he had one thing left him, he wandered down the street.

He had given the few pennies to Electa which made up that half-day's collection, and now found himself without either money or supper. The former he could sleep well without, but what boy of his age could go to bed happy with an empty stomach?

Joe could not, though he had often gone supperless, and he considered how he could accomplish his desires. Steal he would not; beg he could not, while strength remained.

Luck does not always befriend the unfortunate, but, on this occasion, luck started Joe on a trail which was to be full of developments.

He was passing along a nearly-deserted, poorly-lighted street when he chanced to notice a small parcel lying by the curbstone. He picked it up, and found that he had something very neatly tied up in brown wrapping-paper; just such a parcel as an experienced clerk would make.

The time was very remote from the first day of April, so, after a critical glance to see if any one was waiting in ambush to play a joke upon him, he carried the parcel to a street-lamp to make an examination.

He found upon it several words written in pencil, the first of all being a name—Mrs. Eli Roberson. Then followed the street and number.

Joe's hopes arose. It looked as if the parcel, after having been purchased recently, had been

lost by some mischance, and it occurred to him that there might be a supper in it; in other words, that the owner ought to be willing to pay for its return.

The residence given was not far away, and he lost no time in going there.

The house proved to be a plain one of brick, with an alley at one side, and just as the youth reached there a man came out of the alley hastily.

The two confronted each other.

"What have you got there?" demanded the man.

"Got a bundle."

"Is it yours?"

"'Tis, jest now."

"It looks like one I've lost."

"Does it?"

"Yes, and it is; I see the name on it. Boy, did you find it? By jinks! you shall be well rewarded. I'll take it!"

"Don't be in a hurry," answered Joe, cautiously. "Is this your name on byar?"

"No; the name is 'Mrs. Eli Roberson.'"

"Then what hev you ter do with it?"

"I'm her coachman."

"Oh! be you?"

"Yes. I went out with her shopping, and she bought a good many things, and I put them in the carriage. When I got to the stable, which is right in back of the house here, I missed this. I was just starting out to find it. I'm greatly obliged to you."

He put out his hands, but Joe did not surrender the parcel.

"I presoom it's all right," said he, "but it ain't correck fur me ter pass this over ter a total stranger. I reckon I'll jingle the tinker on the door, an' d'liver it ter Mrs. Eli Roberson, in pusson, as 'twere."

"But I don't want her to know it was lost. She will blame me."

"She'd prob'ly blame me ef I give it to an outsider. You'll excoose me, mister, but I never seen you afore, ye know, an' a wise chap won't trust ev'ry man he meets in New York. Ketch on?"

Joe's companion looked angry for a moment, but his face soon cleared.

"You're a sharp kid, and it does you credit. I can fix all that, and satisfy you. It's time for me to take this, and the other purchases, into the house, and deliver them to Mrs. Roberson, according to orders, and you shall go along and see that she gets them. I'll explain your presence by saying that you are a boy who helps me around the stable."

"That's a toler'ble neat plan, but it lacks one element o' success. I'm stricken with poverty. It's gripin' the membrane of my stomjack excessive, an' my dejestive orgins is huntin' in vain fur sistenance. Sech bein' the case, I had allowed I ought ter hev pay fur reserrectin' this bundle."

The coachman laughed.

"All right, my hearty; rely upon me for your supper, a bed to-night, and divers coins of the realm. You shall be well paid. Is it a go?"

"Yes."

"Come on then."

And Joe followed the coachman into the alley, still holding fast to the parcel.

CHAPTER V.

UNDER LOCK AND KEY.

THE stable was soon reached, and Joe found it so comfortable that he would have been delighted to secure quarters in it permanently. The coachman, who gave his name as Obed Mason, took some other articles out of the carriage, and they were ready to enter the house.

"Now, mind you," explained Obed, "you are to pass as a boy I know, and one who has helped me about the stable, at times. As you have nothing to say, this won't be hard; but it would be if Mrs. Roberson got onto the trick. She's a woman with a temper of her own, and it would cost me my job if she knew I was lying to her."

"I won't give ye away," the street-waif promised.

"Here's a dollar for bringing back the bundle. Is it enough?"

"It's a right royal fee," Joe agreed, his eyes brightening.

"Good! Now, follow me. Be sure you don't speak to Mrs. Roberson. There ain't any danger she'll speak to you, for she's proud as you please—though what she's got to be proud of I don't know."

Obed's manner showed that he did not have a good opinion of his mistress, but, as Joe expected to see her for a few moments only, he was not interested in the lady's character.

He followed the coachman into the house.

They went first to the kitchen, where a female servant informed Obed that Mrs. Roberson awaited him in the next room. The man went on, followed by Joe, and the latter saw a tall, black-haired, imperious-looking woman of middle age.

"You are late!" she exclaimed, impatiently.

"Yes, ma'am," agreed Obed, meekly, "but the off horse, he needed attention to make him all right."

"Very well."

She turned and looked at Joe.

"Who is this boy?" she added.

"He's a little chap, named Hughey Flynn, who helps me at times, in the stable."

"An honest boy?"

"Yes, ma'am, or I shouldn't have brought him here."

"You recommend him, do you?"

"Oh! yes, ma'am."

"Boy, let me hear you speak!" commanded the lady, looking at Joe critically.

"What shall I say?"

"Say that you know something."

"Wal, I try ter know something, but it's a good bit ag'in' a feller that the rich folks hev a mortgage on Solomon's wisdom."

Mrs. Roberson looked pleased.

"That wisdom is open to common folk, also. Boy, are you out of employment?"

"I be."

"Then I will give you a situation, if you wish. I am in need of a boy to run errands and make himself generally useful. There will be next to no work, and the little you will be called upon to do will be of the easiest kind. You will sleep in the house so as to be handy when needed. The pay will be liberal. I see that you are a bright boy, and Mason's recommendation is sufficient."

Obed's lower jaw fell down so far that there seemed to be danger of dislocation.

His reckless words had made him guarantee for a boy of whom he knew nothing, and he could not retract what he had said without admitting the falsehood of the opening half of the interview.

Such an acknowledgment would cost him his situation, and he dared not make it.

Joe, amazed by the fact that a bit of good luck actually had fallen to his share, took an entirely different view of the case.

"I'm very much obleeged, ma'am," he answered, as soon as he could recover speech.

"Enough! Mason, you can go to the equine establishment. Send Norah, as you pass out."

Obed went, but not in a happy frame of mind. Possibly he had introduced a criminal into the house who would admit burglars and cause terrible disasters.

Obed was dumfounded.

Norah, the female servant, came in, and Mrs. Roberson directed her to show Joe—or Hughey Flynn, as he had become by Obed's fiction—to a room where he might sleep.

All this was done, and the street-waif was soon alone.

He looked around in bewilderment. He was in a room which, though very plainly furnished, was thoroughly comfortable, and was much better than any room he had ever been in before.

He pinched his flesh experimentatively.

"It hurts!" he admitted, "an' I must be awake, but be I myself? Be I Unlucky Joe? Obed said I was Hughey Flynn, an' I may be, but I don't reck'leck nothin' about Hughey afore. No; it's a straight deal, an' I'm Unlucky Joe, sent a-spinnin' like a top. Beats all natur'! Who'd 'a' thought it? I've gone hungry, an' homeless, an' cold; an' been kicked, an' cuffed, an' howled at, an' now my luck has changed, an' I'm in clover. Jethro! I'd jest be ready ter dance ef it wa'n't fur Electa an' the chillun!"

His once-stolid face had grown bright until he hardly seemed like the same boy, but recollection of his friends checked his flow of spirits.

What roof, if any, sheltered Mrs. Baldwin and her children that night?

Decoyed away by an enemy, into what perils might they not have gone?

Joe shook his head soberly, and sat down to consider what he was to do. He had entered Mrs. Roberson's house and agreed to work for her, but, if he remained there, how was he to discover his blind friend?

The prospect did not look promising. He disliked to give up what might be a good place, but he was determined not to desert Mrs. Baldwin. She had been kind to him, and given to him of her small store, and he would have despised himself had he failed to hold gratitude.

That night he slept soundly, and it was late when he awoke.

Nothing was given him to do until after breakfast, when Mrs. Roberson called him to the pantry. There he saw a waiter covered with dishes and food.

"Take it and follow me," Mrs. Roberson directed.

He obeyed. It was new work, and he found it difficult to keep the dishes from dancing a jig on the waiter, but he followed the lady up the stairs and along the hall to a closed door. This she unlocked.

"Give me the waiter," she ordered.

He complied; she took it, went into the next room and locked the door in his face.

This had not been expected, and, as he had received no further directions, he stood still, uncertain whether he was to go or stay.

After a moment he heard the clicking of a key in another door, which he knew must be at the further side of the inner room.

"Pecooliar sarcumstance!" he murmured.

"Wonder ef it's the style 'mongst the rich an' lofty ter lock things up permisc'us?"

Just then the cry of a child which seemed to be frightened, or in pain, reached the street-waif's ears.

"Guess she's got her orfspring under doo-rance," thought the listener; and he let the matter rest at that.

Half an hour elapsed. He kept his post grimly, and finally heard Mrs. Roberson returning. There was the same sound of doors unlocked and relocked, all betraying a good deal of care for a reason not easy to be surmised.

When the lady saw Joe her dark eyes suddenly sparkled.

"You here!" she exclaimed.

"Yis, mum."

"Have you been acting the spy?"

"Hey?"

"Why didn't you get out of the way?"

"'Cause yer didn't tell me to."

Her display of suspicion and temper ebated after she had made a critical study of his face.

"You ought to have known enough to go without being told; you are not required to hang around in a hall. You can go now, Flynn."

"Yis'm."

Joe went readily, but not without certain new ideas in his mind. Why had Mrs. Roberson been so angry and suspicious—almost startled—when she saw him? Why had she accused him of acting the spy?

"Reckon she's got some secret, an' I'd kinder like ter know what she's got shut up in thar, anyhow— But it ain't none o' my business."

He reached and entered the kitchen. The female servants were talking, and did not notice his reappearance.

"I'd like ter know," asserted the cook, "what sort of folks she's got up there that can't eat with the fam'ly. They must hev tolerable appetites, judgin' by the size o' the breakfast, so why ain't they able ter come down?"

"And why is the south room door locked?" added Norah.

"Looks queer."

"When they come in, the woman felt her way as if she was blind."

"That may be why they don't come down, but even a blind woman ought to have gump-tion enough ter eat like other—"

The cook stopped short. She had seen Joe, and she stopped talking abruptly.

Unlucky Joe, however, had heard enough to interest him. Who was the blind woman of whom they had spoken?

CHAPTER VI.

A STARTLING MEETING.

SUDDEN as had been the cessation of the conversation the servants pretended to ignore Joe, and gave the minutest attention to their work, as if they had no thought outside of it.

And, as eager as the street-waif was to know more, he did not ask any questions. He had his share of shrewdness, and easily realized that he could not help himself by precipitation. If he had been ten years older, and a so-called "handsome" man, he might have impressed the women sufficiently to get particulars, but a boy could not.

He sat down meekly by the range, assuming an innocent air.

After a little meditation he lost faith in his late ideas. The mention of a woman in the house who was blind, or seemed to be, taken in connection with the fact that some one was kept under lock and key, had brought Mrs. Baldwin very vividly to his mind, but it seemed absurd to suppose that she was there.

Why should Mrs. Roberson be her keeper? What interest could a rich woman have in those so poor?

The street-waif dropped this useless meditation and tried to decide what to do. He was anxious to find Electa and her children, but would it be advisable to throw up a good situation in order to follow a trail so blind? Where was he to search?

While he was still undecided he was sent out on an errand, and as it was near his old quarters, he dropped in there to see if tidings had been received of Mrs. Baldwin.

As he had expected not a word had come, and he was left to the inevitable conclusion that the so-called Doctor Jason Blackstone had lured her away, and did not intend to let any word come back.

To his new home went Joe, troubled and uncertain of mind. He reached the alley and started to pass along to the rear, to enter by the back door; but half-way in the alley he came to a sudden stop.

On the ground lay something which, once seen, had all his attention. It was a child's toy—a tin Hussar, battered, dilapidated and erratically speckled with the loss of paint in places, but strangely familiar.

He picked it up, and his wonder increased. He had seen the battered soldier many times before; it had been the especial pride of Electa Baldwin's son!

Joe flashed a quick glance upward. The room wherein was locked the woman who "seemed to be blind" was just above, the windows overlooking the alley.

Unfortunately, the alley was so narrow that no one could be seen at the windows, unless the latter were raised, and such was not the case then.

The street-waif was excited, there was more than chance in all the circumstances he had noticed since he came to Mrs. Roberson's house; and at that moment he was positive that Electa and her children were the occupants of the room above.

Fate had strangely led him to the same house to which they had been taken.

He mechanically put the tin Hussar into his pocket, and going to the kitchen, finished his errand.

Nothing more was asked of him, and he went again to the alley with the hope of being able to see some one at the window, but again the narrow alley baffled him. Once he thought of looking in the stable for a ladder and going up boldly to look in, but the question naturally followed, What good would it do?

He could not rescue them alone, boldly, and he might betray himself and get discharged. It was better to act prudently and secretly, and await the chance to accomplish his purpose.

An hour later, when he was in the kitchen, the front-door bell rung.

"Go answer it," directed the cook, to Joe.

The latter obeyed.

He opened the door, and then stood breathless and open-eyed.

Doctor Jason Blackstone was on the stoop!

Discovery stared the street-waif in the face, but Blackstone entered without a word and banged his high hat down on the hat-tree viciously.

"Tell your mistress that Mr. Hedderson is here!" he directed, imperiously, and then entered the parlor like one perfectly at home.

Not a word passed Joe's lips; he dared not answer. That he had escaped recognition, as it was, seemed little short of miraculous, but Blackstone had not even glanced at him.

It was a narrow escape, and Joe did not fail to be duly grateful.

Once let the self-styled doctor suspect that he was an inmate of the house, and his stay there would be short—unless he was kept as a prisoner.

"Or throwed inter the North River," thought the boy, who was not ignorant of the dark uses to which that noble river was occasionally put.

Mrs. Roberson happened to be in the kitchen for a moment, and he gave the message there. She hastened to join "Mr. Hedderson."

The servants exchanged glances.

"He's around," observed the cook.

"Yes," Norah agreed. "What new deviltry is up, I wonder?"

"Sh!"

The cook breathed the warning, and looked apprehensively at Joe.

"Is he her brother?" asked the waif.

"Whose brother?"

"Mrs. Roberson's."

"Not as I know. Why?"

"I thought they looked alike."

"Maybe they do, a bit."

"He's a handsome man."

"Handsome is as handsome does," corrected the cook, ungraciously.

"Reckon you don't like him."

"I reckon it ain't any of your business whether I do or not. Don't you speak for me!"

"Excuse me, mum," returned Joe, with great politeness, anxious to keep on good terms with the servants. "I didn't mean fur ter in-troode."

"All right, youngster."

His apology was accepted carelessly, and the cook slapped a roll of dough into shape and began to cut out biscuits.

Joe did not feel like remaining idle when important events might be occurring, and he left the kitchen quietly and went up-stairs. There he lingered at a point where he could see the locked door, and it was not a great while before his patience was rewarded.

Mrs. Roberson came up, unlocked the door and entered; fastened it after her and was gone a short time; and then emerged and went down-stairs again.

Soon after she again appeared, followed by Blackstone, and Joe grew excited.

The man was about to visit Mrs. Baldwin. Why? What villainy was afoot?

Unable to decide what he ought to do, and feeling that he was not able to do anything, he kept his place. The man and woman entered the prison-room and locked the door after them.

"He's a fine chap ter play the good Samaritan," muttered the street-boy, bitterly. "I tol' Electa right at the start ter look out fur him, but I'm the one that's ter blame; I hadn't ought ter took him there. Why didn't I look the sarpint over afore I did anything? I'll bet money that he come where I was exhibitin' on purpose ter git at Electa; he didn't know where she was, an' I was fool enough ter show up."

Occupied with such bitter thoughts he stood inactive for awhile, but the suspense was too much for him to bear. Let the risk be what it might, he was resolved to interfere.

He went to the locked door, and was delighted to learn, by the sound of voices, that the other persons were in the next room.

He heard Blackstone speak first of all.

"All you have to do is to sign this paper," the self-styled doctor was saying.

And the answer came in Electa's voice:

"What is the necessity of my signing?"

"Simply to conform to our rules."

Joe's pulse quickened with indignation.

"The sharks are deceivin' her inter signin' some dockymunt," he thought. "There's rascality afoot, sure!"

CHAPTER VII.

A PAPER TO BE SIGNED.

UNLUCKY JOE was greatly excited. He felt sure that some evil plot was being worked against Mrs. Baldwin, but how was he to prove it? how prevent it?

What paper did they want her to sign? He did not see how she could make her already-hard lot any harder by signing, but they would not take all this trouble without some object. In some way the pretended doctor and Mrs. Roberson hoped to benefit by their scheme, and it was just as necessary to prevent it as if it was perfectly clear to her young ally.

Electa proved to be cautious.

"Of course," she replied, "if I accept the charity of your Home, I must conform to its customs."

"We don't doubt your willingness to do so, my dear madam," Blackstone made answer, in an oily manner; "but, you see, we have our rules."

"And I am expected to sign this paper?"

"Yes, madam."

"Remember that I am blind. Would you advise me to sign without knowing what I sign?"

"It is only a mere form."

"I must ask your pardon, sir, but I do not think I ought to do it without knowledge of what I am putting my name to!"

"Brayvoo fur her!" muttered Unlucky Joe, in great admiration.

"I will read you the application for admission, in full:

"I (Blank), hereby request that I be received by the charitable organization known as The Legal-Life Home for the Destitute—"

"Pardon me," interrupted Electa, in an agitated manner, "but you make my position very painful. You read, but I cannot see; I do not know whether I shall sign what you read. This

may be ungrateful, but I have my children look out for, and recklessness would be criminal."

"Do you doubt me?"

"Oh! no, sir."

"Then why this language?"

"My children—"

"They are to be cared for, too; the Home takes in all who are needy, and this worthy lady is the charitable Samaritan thereof."

"Reflect, sir," urged Mrs. Baldwin, with firmness not to be expected. "Suppose you were placed as I am! Would you, with young and helpless children, sign a paper so rashly?"

"Madam, this grows annoying. I have given thirty years of my life to helping the poor, and now you accuse me of rascality!"

Blackstone's voice was tinged with pretended indignation, and Electa answered hastily:

"No, sir; oh! no; I do not do that. Indeed, I do not; but, for my children's sake, I feel that I ought to be prudent. Would you sign your name to a paper, the nature of which was unknown to you?"

"Usually," replied Blackstone, stiffly, "people are ready to sign any paper which is to benefit them. Allow me to ask if you would be satisfied if we called in the clergyman attached to our Home, and had him certify to the document?"

"If you will send for Joseph Eldwin, the youth who brought you to my former quarters, I will trust to his reading."

Unlucky Joe flushed with pleasure; this proof of Electa's confidence was very agreeable.

"A beggar-brat!" exclaimed Jason.

"Doctor, you forget yourself!" interrupted Mrs. Roberson, in pretended reproof, but Joe thought there was more of warning than anything else in it. "Your severe neuralgia has upset your nerves seriously."

"You are right; I am in great pain," muttered Blackstone.

"Dear madam, why should you fear us?" pursued Mrs. Roberson, gently. "Our mission on earth is to care for the unfortunate, and royal thrones or crowns could not tempt us to go astray. I, too, am a mother, and I understand your regard for your sweet children."

"The soft-soap hypocrite!" muttered Joe, under his breath.

"You can, however, rely upon us wholly. Would we take you into our Home, if we had any selfish motives?" added Mrs. Roberson.

Electa was silent.

"The application is of the simplest kind, and binds you to nothing. You can leave at any hour."

"Read it through, please," requested Mrs. Baldwin.

The woman obeyed. What she read was simple enough, and no poor person would have hesitated to sign such a paper. It gave everything to the applicant, and asked nothing in return.

Joe, however, was sure that the paper was not like what was being read.

"I am foolish, perhaps," finally remarked Electa, "and ungrateful for your kindness. I will hesitate no longer; I will sign the paper."

Joe's face grew long and sober. After his friend's wise resistance he had not expected such a termination, though he did see how hard it must be to resist. With starvation facing her, how could she refuse a home for her children?

The street-boy heard the rustling of papers in the other room, and honeyed words from the conspirators, and, finally, Blackstone said distinctly:

"Sign there, please!"

The listener could imagine how the plotter had guided Electa's hand to the proper place, and his own heart was in his mouth, figuratively speaking.

He was tempted to beat upon the door and do his best to stop proceedings, but was deterred by the natural inquiry: What could he do against the conspirators? And, again, to make himself known would be to get ejected from the house at once.

"Hughey Flynn," within, could do more for Electa than Joe Eldwin, without.

There was a pause full of nervous expectancy, and then Blackstone spoke persuasively:

"Sign, please!"

"I can't do it!" Electa exclaimed. "Something tells me not to put my name to that paper!"

"Hooray!" exclaimed Joe, forgetting the need of caution in his joyful excitement, but no one heard the impulsive comment.

Probably the conspirators were too angry and disappointed.

It was not hard to imagine the black looks they were showering upon Electa.

"You make us laughing-stocks!" cried Blackstone, when he recovered speech.

"I am very sorry, but something—I can't tell what—commands me not to sign."

"You are childish!"

"It grieves me deeply—"

"Is it thus you reward us for taking you in?"

"Don't blame me too much—don't! I am so helpless and afflicted that I am wretched. Bear with me, kind friends, if you can!"

"Do you wish to return to your old home of poverty? But I forgot; your former landlady said she would eject you from the house last night. The only residence open to you, besides this friendly Home, is the streets of New York. Would you and your children feel satisfied to tread the pavements, homeless, houseless, hungry?"

Blackstone's voice had arisen in angry reproach, but Mrs. Roberson persuasively put in:

"I think our good lady will sign."

"I can't—indeed, I can't!" murmured Electa, faintly.

"Then we must lay your case before the directors. This is a legally-chartered society, and we are compelled by law to follow our rules. We can have no one here who does not sign. Realizing, as I do, the awful condition of the homeless of New York, I will see our directors before we take the extreme step—how horrible to think of!—of turning you and your babies into the street!"

Joe Eldwin was shrewd enough to understand the new trick. Having failed in the first attempt, the conspirators intended to give Mrs. Baldwin time to think and waver.

Menaced by the danger of being cast into the street, blind, helpless, with the two children to share her woe, the chances were all in favor of the possibility that she would yield, finally.

The great pains taken by the plotters was evidence of a purpose as strong as it was mysterious. What was back of all this?

CHAPTER VIII.

CALLED IN TO FACE JASON.

"THERE is a quicker way to settle the matter," observed Electa.

"How?" asked Mrs. Roberson.

"I mentioned the boy, Joseph Eldwin. He is young, but is one of my most trusted friends. It was I who taught him to read, and he is devoted to my interests. If you will call him, I will abide by what he says about the paper."

"Where is he to be found?"

"He would be at my old home, but if Mrs. McFagan has kept her threat, and put out the furniture, I don't know where poor Joseph is. However, he will call here soon, if you can wait."

"Call here?" repeated Mrs. Roberson.

"Yes. Doctor Blackstone left a card with directions written on it, so Joseph could find us."

"Oh! you snake!" muttered Joe, "if I don't pay ye fur sneakin' back up-stairs after that card, it'll be because luck never turns!"

"The boy shall come," Blackstone promised.

"When?"

"We'll send for him at once."

"Thank you very much."

"You state that you'll sign, if this Joe says the paper is all right?"

"Yes, sir."

"The boy shall come."

"That is sufficient, Mrs. Baldwin," added the Roberson woman. "You can return to your room, my dear madam."

Joe heard some one moving, and then the distant clicking of a key told that Electa had been locked in her room.

It was not strange that she had doubts of the plotters when she was kept under lock and key, but they probably had made a reasonable explanation, with reference to the "rules of the Home," or something like it.

The amateur detective had only time to beat a retreat from his post of attention when that door was unlocked, and the conspirators came out.

Joe had become invisible.

"Come down to the parlor, Mrs. Roberson," directed Blackstone; and they descended the stairs.

"I've got ter hear the rest," Joe decided. "I may git a clew ter what the scheme is."

He knew that the parlor was double, and if he

could get near the connecting doors he would be all right; so, while they went down the front way he descended by the back stairs. He expected to encounter a servant and be baffled, but his luck held good.

He reached the back parlor without adventure, and was soon by the folding-doors.

Blackstone and Mrs. Roberson were inside, talking busily.

"I think that the threat of turning her into the street will have effect," said the latter.

"But it's not sure."

"She won't let her children suffer."

"In any case, I have a better plan."

"What is it?"

"Palm off some other boy as Joe Eldwin."

"Can it be done?"

"You doubt it, eh?"

"Yes."

"It looks risky, but I believe that if I can get the right sort of a youngster—bright, but uneducated—I can drill him so that he can fill Joe's shoes."

"It would not do to let the Baldwin children see him."

"Of course not."

"The blind are very acute in other ways. I think Mrs. Baldwin would know it was not the right voice."

"But I intend to train our substitute."

"It may work; and, by the way, I have a boy here who may fill the bill. His name is Hugh Flynn. I happened upon him last evening, and, knowing that I should want an errand boy while those up-stairs guests were here, I hired him. He is rude, ignorant, low and brutish; and has a face on him fit for Sing Sing; but he is sharp and bright."

Unlucky Joe smiled grimly. The description of himself showed that either Mrs. Roberson was not a good judge, or he was lacking in certain items of beauty.

"Just the boy," answered Jason. "I'll see him!"

The street-waif started. The last turn of affairs did not please him. To face Blackstone seemed sure ruin, for would not the doctor see that the purposed substitute was not a bogus, but the real article?

"Let me call him," volunteered Mrs. Roberson, and she rung the bell.

Joe dodged out into the hall, and then to another room. He was facing a crisis, and had but little time to decide what to do. His first impulse was to get out of the house and avoid being seen, but this would be only postponing the trouble.

If he remained on the premises, he would have to face the danger sooner or later.

He had noticed that the parlor was quite dark, the curtains being lowered to keep out the sun; and, after a little meditation, he determined not to avoid notice.

Norah answered the ring, and Joe allowed her to find him easily. He was directed to go to the parlor, and, assuming a free-and-easy swagger quite foreign to him, he went.

He at once came under the unfriendly battery of two pairs of eyes—unfriendly, because they were his enemies, even if they did not know it.

"This is Flynn," remarked Mrs. Roberson.

"Hum! A well-built knave!" commented Jason.

"Knave o' trumps," amended Joe, with great nonchalance.

"Are you? I hope so. Your name is Flynn, is it?"

"H. Patrick Flynn, usually called Hughey."

"Are you honest?"

"Everybody out o' Sing Sing is."

"Questionable, but let it pass. Have you lived near here?"

"On Houston street, wid de O'Neills, Perzi-coffs, Lajeunesses an' Alvarados."

"A choice colony, I should say."

"No flies on us."

"What has been your business?"

"I've done a good 'eal at holdin' down street-corners, but am some prickly pears at real estate, law, an' patent-medicine biz," returned the alleged Flynn, with desperate volubility.

"A sharp fellow of the streets!" Blackstone agreed. "Are you faithful?"

"Like a porus plaster."

"Do you like money?"

"I wish I was loaded down wid it. De stuff is jest de boss thing ter have, d'ye moind, an' I'm de blokesy dat is out for de stuff."

"You're a choice specimen!"

"D'ye see anny havseed in me hair?"

Joe was amazed at his own recklessness as he rattled off all this, and not a little ashamed of his words and swaggering manner; but it was

plain that Jason must not see the same kind of boy that Joe Eldwin had been.

Mrs. Roberson looked disgusted, but the doctor turned to her approvingly.

"He will do, if we can tone down his 'tough' propensities. He looks surprisingly like the other boy."

"That is good."

"Shall we proceed?"

"Do as you think best."

Mrs. Roberson spoke doubtfully. Good or bad as she might be, or was, she had enough refinement so that she despised iownness in any one. She was surprised to see her new recruit blossom out thus, but attributed it to Blackstone's familiar way with him.

"My lad, do you think that if I gave you lessons you could pretend to be another boy, and act like him, in the presence of one who knows him?"

"Why, dat person would know I wa'n't him."

"But the person is blind."

"Oh!"

"I would pay you well."

"Then I'm your huckleberry."

"Good! I'll see you this evening and give you lessons. I'm sure he will do, Mrs. Roberson; he is strangely like the other boy, in looks, though his voice and manner are quite different."

"I am glad if he fits the requirements. You can go now, Flynn. Wait! Go to the address on this card, and tell the lady that important business prevents me from calling to-day."

Joe took the card and left the room. He had intended to listen further, but Jason gave indications of leaving, and the boy formed another plan. Leaving the house he loitered in a doorway until the doctor came out, and then followed him.

It was not a long pursuit. Two blocks away the man entered another house, and, going close to the door, Joe saw the name "Hedderson" upon the plate.

This seemed to prove that such was his real name, instead of Blackstone.

"I've fell afoul of a most gallus scheme," thought Joe, as he went about his errand, "but what in 'tarnation is it? Why should they seek ter harm Electa?"

He puzzled over the question vainly for some time, and then fell to wondering how he was to baffle them. If brought into a room with Blackstone, where the light was good, he would, of course, be recognized at once.

And it was hard to see how he was going to rescue the Baldwins.

He thought of using a ladder at the alley window before-mentioned, but, even if he could get them out, to what place would he take them?

He delivered the card, and had started home when he happened to think of Joab Baldwin, the eccentric owner of the miniature ships. He had promised to call upon Joab that day, and, as he was near the house, he had no disposition to let the chance pass. He was soon knocking at the door labeled "3."

"Come in!" growled a deep voice, and Joe obeyed.

The little old man sat at a table, fixing the rigging of a ship, but did not turn his head.

"Tongue!" he cried, hoarsely.

"It's me, Mr. Baldwin."

"None of my business! Tongue!"

"But you told me ter call to-day."

The self-styled philosopher turned his bushy head.

"Oh! so it's you?" he added, less fiercely.

"Yis."

"Want ter work fur me, eh?" demanded Joab.

"Yis; I'd like ter."

Joab ran his fingers up through his great head of hair, and, holding them there, would have looked like a dime-museum freak had it not been that his face was intelligent, and his eyes keen and not unpleasant. There was a considerable delay, then he suddenly added:

"Got sand?"

"I hope I ain't a coward," Joe answered.

The philosopher smiled grimly, pointed to the room in which the street-waif had heard the strange sounds the day before, and added:

"In there a ferocious tiger is at large. Go in and see if he'll eat you up or not!"

CHAPTER IX.

THE PHILOSOPHER'S HOSTILE VISITOR.

JOAB'S manner was very matter-of-fact as he gave this advice, but Joe shook his head.

"Don't keer ter tackle the animile. I never was much of a tiger-hunter, nohow, an' now I ain't so young as I was once. A tame tiger,

whose teeth an' toe-nails had been pulled out, might suit me, but one fixed up with modern improvements fur chawin' a feller all ter hash wouldn't hit me favorable."

"It would soon be over," chuckled Joab.

"Is it over with the feller yer tiger tackled when I's in hyar afore?"

The philosopher wheeled abruptly and faced Joe.

"What's that?" he asked, sharply.

The street-waif repeated the question coolly.

"Hah! hah! hah! What do you know about that?" demanded the little old man, ferociously.

"I've got ears, an' couldn't very wal help hearin' the rumpus. You know you went in ter stop it. Dunno whether the tiger had then chawed up the man, or the man had chawed up the tiger."

Joab wagged his patriarchal beard gravely.

"You are a dangerous person," he remarked.

"Them who is innercent fear nothin'."

"Does that apply to you and me?"

"Can't answer fur you."

"I'm afraid I made a mistake in ever taking any notice of you."

"Hev I done you any harm?"

"No, but you may."

"Don't see how."

"Well, well, we will see. Sit down!"

Joe obeyed, and turned a longing eye upon the miniature ships. The collection filled him with admiration. If his own cherished craft had been worthy of notice, these were doubly so. Joe had spent many an hour by the river, studying the vessels there, and he was now able to detect the marvelous fidelity of Joab's imitations.

The old man, who seemed to be a queer compound of fierceness and grim pleasantry, chuckled again.

"Old Neptune isn't any slouch at his job, eh? He ought not to be. Many a year I've sailed the ocean, and what I don't know about the craft that plow its bosom few folks can tell me. I mind the time I made my first miniature ship. I was a captive among the savages on the Yucatan Coast, and, being thin in flesh, they gave me time to fatten before eating me. With only my jack-knife as a helper I made a ship much like those, and the cannibals admired it very much."

"But they didn't eat you?" Joe asked, eagerly.

"I never assuaged their hankerings."

"How'd you git off?"

"Well, while I was making the toy ship I made a decent kind of a boat, too, secretly, and one day I set sail in my boat and left my cannibal friends forever. No doubt I broke their bill of fare up totally."

The street-waif looked at Joab with open-eyed admiration. He began to see that, though the little old man was very fierce at times, he could be as gentle as a lamb when he felt like it, and, withal, as jolly as a sailor ought to be.

Just then a knock sounded at the door.

"Come!" growled Joab.

A tall, slender man entered.

"Tongue!" cried the philosopher, fiercely.

"Sir?"

"Tongue!"

The man looked perplexed, but, after a little hesitation, added:

"You are Joab Baldwin—"

"Who said I wasn't?"

"My name is George Holland—"

"None of my business! What do you want?"

"I want to see you, and I am going to!" retorted Holland, angrily. "I am not a dog to be snarled at, and it will behoove you to be decent."

"Tongue!"

"What do you mean by that senseless reiteration?"

"You've got a tongue; use it. Explain! Say what you want! Talk, or levant!"

Joab was in his fiercest mood, but the newcomer did not seem alarmed.

"I am not surprised to find you a barbarian, but I warn you not to molest me. I am armed with a revolver, and shall not hesitate to use it upon you, if you attack me!"

The philosopher chuckled grimly.

"What kind of a den do you think you've got into, mister?" he asked.

"A den of iniquity!"

"Oh! do you?"

"Yes. I know more about you, Joab Baldwin, than your neighbors do."

"Possible?"

"Yes. I know what happened in Weehawken a dozen years ago."

"Did some one have the gout?"

"Some one was murdered, and I suspect that you were knowing to it!"

Holland threw out the bombshell boldly, and steadied himself on his feet like one who has made a dangerous move, but felt able to carry it on.

"What brand of liquor do you drink?" inquired the philosopher, imperturbably.

"Wait! This accusation is not to be sneered down. I will prove to you that I know you well. You were the second son of Josiah Baldwin, his oldest offspring being named Nathan. Nathan married and had one child, Wilbur Baldwin."

Joe Eldwin started. Although he had never seen Electa's husband, he had heard her speak of that gentleman often enough to know that his name had been Wilbur Baldwin.

Evidently, it was more than chance that Joab's surname was the same as the other family's.

"You were a sailor," Holland pursued, "and your nephew, Wilbur, took to the same calling. He was lost at sea, about two years ago."

Joab regarded the speaker in silence.

"This, however, has nothing to do with my errand," added the visitor. "I have come to speak of the death of Zeno Dorr, a miser murdered in Weehawken. Do you know anything about it?"

"I've heard of it," was the careless response.

"But you wasn't there, eh?"

"The man who says I was, is a liar!"

"Gently! You need not glare at me so ferociously; I am not to be frightened, nor can you do me harm, as I suspect that you have harmed my partner. I am a detective; so was John Graves. He came here several days ago to see you about the Weehawken murder; he has never returned."

"None of my business!" snapped Joab.

"You will find that it is very much your business. Where is Graves?"

"Don't know; nothing to me."

"Carefully!"

Joab arose.

"Do you threaten me?" he demanded.

"I do—with the law."

"As for me, I can fight my own battles!"

With this declaration the philosopher started toward Holland. Unlucky Joe was watching with almost breathless interest. His sympathies were all with Baldwin, but the case was so complicated that he did not pretend to understand it.

Holland had been using his eyes while in the room. He had darted inquisitive glances all around, and, plainly, had summed up the situation in a systematic manner.

Now, as Joab advanced, the visitor suddenly put forth his hand commandingly.

"Wait! Give me a moment!" he directed.

Quickly he moved to the side-door, gave the key a twist and flung the door open. The moment that Joab perceived his intention, he sprang forward to prevent it, but was not agile enough.

Joe saw Holland cross the threshold with the ship-maker at his heels, and, greatly excited, the boy followed.

The memory of his own last visit was fresh in his mind; he recollected the sound which indicated that a wild animal was there, and the cry of terror from some unknown man.

What would be the result of this fresh intrusion?

The question was soon answered.

Just as Joe reached the door, he heard a snarl which set his nerves to quivering, and then the sound of a fall. Looking ahead, he saw Holland prostrate on the floor, with a tiger standing over him.

CHAPTER X.

JOAB LAYS DOWN THE LAW.

UNLUCKY JOE was less surprised than an adult would have been. Had the latter been told that a tiger was kept in a private room anywhere in New York he would not have believed it, but it was only a short time before that Joe had been one of a crowd that collected when the occupants of a store made away with a python found in their cellar.

The big snake had escaped from a menagerie in the next building, Joe had been told, and now he was not surprised to see a tiger in Joab Baldwin's attic.

Yet it was a thrilling sight when the boy saw the animal hovering over Holland, and that person appeared to be absolutely paralyzed with terror.

He neither stirred nor spoke.

Joe expected to see the tiger's jaws close upon him, but nothing of the kind happened.

"Nebuchadnezzar!" cried Joab, commandingly.

The tiger looked up.

"Come here, sir!"

The tiger looked regretfully at his victim, hesitated, and then came meekly to Baldwin's side.

"Get up, idiot!" added the philosopher, this time addressing Holland.

The detective scrambled to his feet.

"In mercy's name, don't let him kill me!" the fellow gasped, piteously.

"Why, you poor ignoramus, Nebuchadnezzar hasn't got a tooth in his head. Kill you? Bah! he would not kill a mouse."

"Don't you believe him!" directed a faint voice from one corner of the room.

"John Graves!" Holland exclaimed.

It was a singular scene that Unlucky Joe saw. The room, although large, had only one window, and this was covered with stout iron bars, so that no one, and nothing of any great size, could pass in or out.

In the further corner of the room stood a cage much like what Joe had seen at the menagerie in Central Park, during his visits there, except that it was not so strong. And in the cage was, not an animal, but the man whom Holland had hailed as John Graves.

"Let me out!" wailed the latter; "I've been here a week, Holland!"

"Yes; and right well you deserve it!" growled Joab.

"Open the door, Holland," Graves added.

"Nebuchadnezzar, attention!" ordered Joab.

The tiger fixed its gaze upon its master, vibrated its tail, and then, as Baldwin slowly crooked his finger toward Holland, looked at that person and opened a cavernous mouth.

The detective retreated.

"Don't desert me!" groaned Graves.

"Look here," growled the philosopher, "don't be a craven. You came here as big as Jumbo in life, and told what wonderful things you were going to do. You accused me of a crime I never committed, and said you would take me into custody. I argued, but all in vain. When I saw that you were working with a venomous spirit of hatred, in place of devotion to law, I thought a trifle of restraint would be good for you. I thrust you in with Nebuchadnezzar, and there you have been for six days."

"Exposed to instant death all the while."

"Stuff and nonsense!"

"That horrible animal—"

"Is harmless. Poor old Neb would not hurt a baby."

"I have been in hourly dread."

"Shows your lack of sand. You're not built right!"

Joab tried to speak lightly, but Joe easily perceived that he was deeply troubled. He had a riddle to deal with which was far from easy. It had been a matter of no great difficulty to shut Graves up, but he could not keep many more men there.

The philosopher had taken a step as risky as it was bold when he made the first detective a prisoner. Whether he was justified in thus going against the law remained to be seen, but if Graves and Holland were all against him, he had one friend.

Joe Eldwin sympathized only with his host.

Holland began to recover his wits.

"This thing is the most diabolical outrage ever perpetrated in New York!" he asserted.

"Got them, again?" inquired Joab.

"How dared you take a city detective and shut him up with a wild animal?—or shut him up at all, for that matter. That's a State's Prison offense!"

"How dared the varmint molest me?"

"He was doing his duty."

"False!—false as Judas!" cried Baldwin.

"Why so?"

"It was blackmail; nothing less!"

"Humph! What have you to be blackmailed out of?"

"Nothing; and as I couldn't give, I had to take the only other course open to me, and shut up the blackmailer."

"What has become of the money taken from the murdered man?"

"How should I know?"

"How can you live without work? You were a sailor, and, afterward, animal-tamer in a circus. Report has it that you laid up nothing, yet you can live and do no work."

"That's my business!"

"It may be the law's."

"Carefully, or I'll put you in yonder cage with your friend."

"Oh! don't be rash, Holland!" implored Graves.

Holland showed no signs of pressing the war of words. Brave as he tried to be, he stood in great awe of Nebuchadnezzar, and feared to feel the tiger's claws.

A silence followed which was full of anxiety to all parties.

"Baldwin," resumed the second detective, finally, "I must ask you to let us go away from here."

"You want to do more mischief, eh?"

"We want our freedom."

"What would you do, if free?"

"If we ever get a chance, hit back at you!"

"But not now?"

"We can do no more than give you a reprieve, as the price of freedom."

The philosopher smiled sarcastically.

"No doubt, your pledge would be as good as gold. I know you of old. Very likely you are detectives, for you were once; but the law is disgraced by your touch. You went into it only to make all you could, and your idea of a detective's calling is to blackmail whomsoever you can. If Graves had been an honest man he would never have been shut up by me, but I knew him to be a scoundrel of the darkest tinge. What wretch is more despicable than he who lives upon the follies or weaknesses of his fellow-beings?"

All of Joab's eccentricities had vanished. He stood very erect, and his voice was solemn—almost grand.

Joe Baldwin was thrilled, and felt that he had not given his adherence rashly.

"You are hard on us, Baldwin," mumbled Holland.

"I know you well."

"We won't quarrel on this point, but one agreement we will make. We are beaten, and we accept our defeat. Let us go free, and we will both take oath that we will never molest you."

"How touching!" sneered Joab, with sarcasm. "Your oaths would be worth as much as the fanning of a fly's wing to cool the air. I want no pledges from either of you."

"But you can rely—"

"I can rely upon nothing. You will ruin me if you can, but I defy you. Other men must know you as well as Baldwin, the hermit, does, and I give you leave to harm me all you can."

He crossed the room with long steps and flung open the door of the cage.

"Come out!" he ordered.

Graves looked apprehensively at the tiger.

"Go, craven!" Joab added. "Don't be afraid of a tiger which, always tame and harmless, is now too old to do mischief."

The blackmailer still hesitated, and Baldwin seized him by the arm and sent him spinning across the room.

"Get out of my sight!" he commanded, fiercely.

The evil pair were not slow to retreat to the outer room.

"Your way is clear," continued the philosopher, "and you may tread it at once. Skip, or I'll set Nebuchadnezzar upon you!"

"We'll see you again—"

Thus began Holland, in sullen vindictiveness, but Joab caught up a stick of wood.

"Get out!" he reiterated.

Graves went in haste, and his companion, finding himself deserted, lost no time in following suit.

The door closed upon them.

"I've got to move," observed the old ship-maker, in a quiet way.

"Leave here, d'ye mean?" asked Unlucky Joe.

"Yes."

"Where are you goin'?"

"Don't know; but, after that fellow is let loose, it isn't safe to stay here. I couldn't make a regular prison, so I had to let them go. Boy, don't set me down as a knave—"

"I don't!"

"For those fellows are just the rascals I painted them. They are blackmailers who use their office as detectives as a means of working their villainous ends. Now, Graves may take steps to have me arrested for shutting him up, but there are reasons why I think he may not do it; his own armor is not thick. However, I must leave here. I hate to do it, but I don't want to be lugged off to prison."

"Mr. Baldwin, may I ask you one question?"

"By all means. Go on! Tongue!"

"Was the Wilbur Baldwin, your nephew, who was lost at sea, the same wot was lost in the Ocean Beauty?"

CHAPTER XI.

A NEW CHAMPION ENLISTED.

"THE same man, poor boy!" Joab replied.

"Did you like him?" Joe continued.

"Right well."

"Like his fam'ly?"

"I never saw them," answered Joab, with a sigh. "You see, it was like this: When I left the sea I became an animal-tamer, having seen a good deal of wild life in my day. I only left the latter business five years ago, old as I was. Maybe I'd be in it now only for a foolish quarrel with Wilbur. Our trouble was over almost nothing, but we separated. I went West with the circus and traveled six months. Then my heart smote me; Wilbur was my brother's only child, and I ought to love, not hate him. I threw up my job, vowed never to shave or cut my hair until my boy had forgiven me, and started back East."

The philosopher paused, sighed and bade fair to forget that he was telling a story, but suddenly aroused and went on:

"I never found him. Years passed, but we were apart. He had gone to sea, but just how and where I could not learn. When news came it was to the effect that he was lost at sea in the Ocean Beauty, and had left a wife and family. Then I tried to find them, but, failing, settled down here as a hermit and long-haired crank. My only companion has been Nebuchadnezzar. I trained him, years ago. He drifted out of my sight, and it was only chance that I happened on him, a year ago. He was old and worthless, and was about to be killed when I offered to take him. I did so, got my landlord to let me keep him here, and here he's been since. He's as harmless as a kitten, unless I stir him up."

The speaker turned an affectionate glance upon the tiger, but suddenly wheeled upon Joe. "How did you know my nephew had a family?" he demanded. "It has not been mentioned here."

"I know 'em."

"Know whom?"

"The fam'ly."

"Wilbur's family?"

"Yis."

Joab caught the boy's arm.

"Don't joke an old man!" he exclaimed, in a shaking voice. "If you don't mean it, say so!"

"I know Electa Baldwin an' her children, Charles an' Ethel; an' Electa's husband was Wilbur. Don't see how it can be any other Baldwin except yer neevy. Do you?"

The old man's face was twitching strangely.

"You know them!" he muttered, hoarsely.

"Like a fly!"

"Where are they? Are they well? Are they happy?"

"They're well, but not happy."

"Why not?"

"Wilbur left them very poor—"

"I will try to take care of them. I have but a small sum of money—it don't run to the lot of the Baldwins to get money. I've had some, but I never saved it in the days when I made good wages. What I have now would not keep the family a year, but I have made a living in this attic, constructing things for sale, and I can keep at it—if Graves and Holland will let me alone. Where are Wilbur's children?"

"Tell me one thing aforehand. Hev you got any relations—had Wilbur got any—who was rich?"

"No."

"Are you sure?"

"Positive! I know all of his nearest relatives. They are, at present, four brothers, half-cousins of Wilbur. They are honest, but poor as Job's turkey."

"Then I can't see why Electa is persecuted."

"Who is persecuting her?"

"A feller named Hedderson, an' a M. Roberson."

"Never heard of them."

"They've got her an' her chilluns shut up—"

"Shut up!" shouted Joab. "Wilbur's children shut up?"

"Yis—"

"Where? How? When?"

The little old man's eyes were flashing, and Joe might have been alarmed had he not previously had evidence that a kind heart beat under the philosopher's old coat.

In a few well-chosen words the street-waif told how Electa and her children, after a hard battle with poverty, had been mysteriously carried away and imprisoned by Hedderson, alias Doctor Blackstone, and Mrs. Roberson.

Joab listened attentively, but shook his head when the story was told.

"The explanation does not lay on the Bald-

win side of the house. If her signature is wanted to a paper, it is a money matter, and they are trying to get her to sign away her rights. Now, I simply know there is nothing on the Baldwin side to account for that. We are as poor as men and women can be."

"Electa was an Alliston, an'she's jest as dead sure that there ain't no money there!"

"Strange! However, no time need be lost on idle speculations. Have you a plan?"

"Fur helpin' her?"

"Yes."

"No."

"My own movements are a good deal restricted. If I go to the police, I may throw myself right into John Graves's clutches, and he hates me cordially. Let him accuse me of killing Zeno Dorr, the Weehawken miser—I kill him! why, boy, I'll bet my last cent that John Graves did it, himself, and have my reasons for thinking so. But I can't prove it, nor prove my own innocence of the crime. The only person who could establish an alibi for me was Wilbur Baldwin, and he, poor lad! sleeps at the bottom of the Atlantic, with the ship Ocean Beauty for a coffin!"

Joab brushed his hand across his eyes.

It was hard to believe that this man was the same person who was accustomed to receive all callers so fiercely and rudely, but all things have an explanation, if it can be reached.

The philosopher aroused and continued:

"Continue to deceive Hedderson, or Blackstone, or whatever his name may be; and, if you are finally ushered into Electa's presence, reveal the whole plot to her. As for me, I will try to learn who these conspirators are. Their names are not familiar to me, or to Electa, and from this fact I infer that they are still under false colors, no matter what Hedderson's door-plate says."

"But can't we git 'em out?" Joe asked.

"I'm afraid, if I apply to the police, it will ruin all."

"I don't mean that. Let's do it secret."

"How?"

"By the winder, usin' a ladder."

"That's a bold scheme."

"We'd do it at night, of course."

"It may be worth considering."

"I hate ter hev them left ter them sharks."

Joab smote the table with his hand.

"They shall not be left!" he cried.

"Brayvo! You're a trump keerd, ef you do use folks rough when they fu'st opens the door."

The philosopher smiled.

"That's all put on. I have to keep idle observers away, an' nobody likes a crank. Not knowing that I let my hair grow long because I vowed never to cut it until I was reconciled to Wilbur, they think I am flighty up aloft; and I kept up the idea by receiving visitors as you've seen me. I was usually left alone. Tongue!"

"A good scheme."

"Set one thing down as a fact, we are going to save Wilbur's family. True, the odds are all against us, and I may be arrested whenever I show my head on the street, but, let Hedderson and his female partner be ever so rich, or powerful, we will—we must beat them out!"

"I'm with yer, you bet!"

"You're a good one. Now, to get away from here. I'll see the landlord and ask him to care for Nebuchadnezzar, which he will do willingly. Wait here!"

Joab left the room, but was gone only a short time. Returning, he made a few simple preparations for departure, one of which was to gather his long hair up skillfully under a big hat, and then they started for the street.

"We may be arrested by Graves at the door," Baldwin admitted, "but we must go, anyhow."

CHAPTER XII.

A STRANGE BOOK TO READ.

WHEN the outer door was reached Joab sent a quick glance to both the right and the left, but there was no sign of a skulking enemy.

He walked down the street with Unlucky Joe by his side.

"I will take refuge for a day or two with some friends of mine," the philosopher explained, "and there I will consider what can be done. All this has come upon me so suddenly and unexpectedly that, with the odds strongly against us, I am not able to jump at the means of relief."

"I reckon I kin take keer of Electa an' the chillun fur awhile," Joe returned.

"Your pluck is good. Remember what I told you about continuing to deceive Hedderson, and, if you arrive at a crisis, hasten to me."

"Kerrect! I'll do it."

Joab's new quarters were soon reached. The

street-waif only waited to see him surely domiciled there, and then started for Mrs. Roberson's again.

He was in a more hopeful mood. The way in which Joab had dealt with the detective-black-mailers proved him to be a man of great energy and capability, and such an ally was good to have.

But, aided or unaided, the boy was determined to fight for Electa and her children to the last. A great change had come over him since the hour when the reckless driver destroyed his miniature ship on the street; the sight of his best friends in such trouble had stirred him out of his old stolidity into earnest sympathy, and all of his best impulses were at the front.

His prolonged absence was not commented upon when he reached the Roberson house.

The servants were busy as usual, and the lady of the house was reading a book in the parlor. Joe ascended to the next floor, but could hear nothing of the prisoners. If they had been in the room next to the hall he would have rapped, but the condition of affairs made it impossible to communicate with his friends.

During the remainder of the day there were no new developments. Twice he was sent on an errand, and a few odd jobs were given him in the house, but all was of trivial nature.

Once, after Mrs. Roberson left the parlor, he chanced to be passing the door when he noticed upon the table the book which he had seen her reading previously.

Idle curiosity led him to go in and look at it. The title was ponderous in comparison with his limited education, but he managed to grasp its meaning.

It was as follows: "Poisons: Their use and misuse; their effect upon the human system; the symptoms of slow or sudden poisoning; the lessons of certain murder trials; and directions showing how all cases of poisoning should be dealt with to effect a cure."

Joe's eyes expanded.

"Julius Napoleon!" he gasped.

Again he looked at the title, hoping that he had made a mistake, but it stared him in the face just as before.

"She's been readin' a book on p'isons, I vum! Now, what does that mean? It makes me shiver ter guess at it! She's got some pris'ners up-stairs, an' they won't do w'ot she wants them ter do. Kin it be—kin it be that she's goin' ter give them p'ison?"

The idea was so alarming that he stood in a daze for awhile, but a footstep in the hall aroused him. He put the book down hastily, slipped into the back-parlor, and then made a successful retreat to the kitchen.

What he had seen, however, could not be forgotten. He could not conceive why Mrs. Roberson should read the book without an object, and what should the object be unless it pointed to Electa?

The remainder of the day was full of anxious suspense to the yoke-mate of adversity. He laid many plans for rescuing his friends, but could find no hope in any except the original scheme.

If they were taken away it seemed that it must be done by raising a ladder in the alley. Night approached.

Joe felt that a good deal of responsibility rested upon his young shoulders. As the conspirators were determined to make Electa sign the mysterious paper, it was not likely that they would delay much about it, and he was not surprised when Dr. Blackstone appeared just at twilight.

The street-waif was summoned to join him in the parlor.

"Well, Flynn, how are you?" asked Jason, with an attempt at jocular familiarity.

"Toler'ble, sir," was the reply.

"Are you ready for your job?"

"I be."

"Then I want to give you a few lessons so you can speak and act like Joe Eldwin. Do you think you can pan out well?"

"Reckon so. I almost 'magine I be him, now," Joe returned, coolly.

"Good! By the way, you may light the gas; it is getting dark here!"

The youth went to the mantel.

"Thar ain't no matches," he asserted.

"Let it go, then. Now, your voice is too deep and strong for Joe's. Try to get on a more tenor pitch. Say, 'Electa, I'm yer friend, an' I wouldn't deceive ye.'"

The so-called Hugh Patrick Flynn obeyed.

"Good! That is very much like Joe Eldwin," commented the doctor, approvingly.

"I thought I could do it."

"You are an apt pupil. Say, 'I've been all

t'rough de house, Electa, an' I reckon it's a right good harbor for ye.'"

Hugh Patrick said it obediently.

"Nobly, nobly!" Blackstone declared. "You are getting almost on to Eldwin's very tone and way. With a little more practice you will be all right."

The lesson continued, and Joe's gravity was remarkable. It was a situation far beyond the common run when a person was taken in hand by a self-constituted teacher and given lessons in the art of speaking like *himself*!

Joe saw the humorous side of the case and rather enjoyed it, anxious as he was in regard to the final outcome.

He showed great shrewdness, too, and got along just fast enough to encourage Jason, yet not so rapidly as to arouse suspicion.

"That'll do," decided the doctor, at last. "Now, let me instruct you. We will take you into a room where there is a blind woman. You will pretend to be glad to see her, speak like an old friend, and then look over a certain paper and assert that it is what I say it is. You will talk down her fears and get her to sign it, and twenty dollars will be your reward."

"Jiminy Cricket!" cried Hugh Patrick, in pretended delight.

"How does that fit?"

"Boss!"

"Oh! I pay well."

"Yer pay like de royal dooks, sor."

"All right, Hughsey. Now, we shall leave the woman's children in the other room, for if they set eyes on you, our fiction that you are Joe Eldwin would go to pieces with a smash; but they might do such a thing as to peer through the keyhole. To avoid all danger, we shall turn the gas as low as possible and still have it light enough for us to see. The blind woman won't know the difference."

"Kerrect."

Joe was delighted with this plan. Ever since he came to Mrs. Roberson's house it had been his good luck to see Blackstone in a very dim light, and the doctor had failed to recognize him.

This was partially due, probably, to the fact that the man had thought only of Electa at the first interview, and had barely glanced at Joe. Perhaps, too, he was weak at remembering faces.

Anyhow, he had not yet discovered the truth, and the plan to turn down the gas, as indicated, was one more step in Joe's favor.

"You can go, now," Jason added. "When we want you, you shall be notified."

"Thank'ee, sor."

The street-waif shambled out awkwardly, and was left alone for the next two hours. Blackstone and Mrs. Roberson dined together, and, judging by the merry laughter from their room, enjoyed themselves very much.

In the mean while Joe was alone, forgotten, but not idle. His work was mental, and of the hardest kind. How was he to baffle the plotters? He could, with a few words, warn Mrs. Baldwin and let her know that the pretended Samaritans were her enemies, but such precipitate action, while useful in one way, might expose her to greater perils.

With the truth known, the evil pair might put both Electa and himself in peril of their lives.

Before he had been able to arrive at any conclusion, he was summoned to the room of trial. He went as boldly as possible, and found the conspirators there, already, the gas being turned low enough so that the danger of detection was still slight.

Blackstone nodded to Mrs. Roberson, and she unlocked the next door and entered.

"How's your nerve, Hugh?" the doctor asked.

"Prime!"

"Good! You'll make a success."

"You bet!"

Joe tried to speak nonchalantly, but, despite all his efforts to be calm, his heart thumped at a rate which made it annoying.

What would be the result of this momentous interview?

He longed for a reprieve, but none came. Mrs. Roberson soon reappeared, followed by Electa.

CHAPTER XIII.

JOE FACES A CRISIS.

MRS. BALDWIN looked around eagerly, and Unlucky Joe went to her side at once.

"Hullo, Electa! how be you?" was his off-hand greeting.

"Joe, Joe, is it indeed you?" the blind woman answered, tremulously.

"Tain't nobody else."

"Oh! I am so glad to see you."

"Reckon I'm some tickled myself."

"I was afraid you would not come."

"No fear o' that."

"Have you had any home, poor boy, since I left?"

"Oh! sartain. Your frien', Susan, took in yer furnitoer, so thar was nothin' fur Mrs. McFagan ter pitch inter the street; an' as fur me, I went out an' found a good fam'ly that tuk me in, give me food an' raiment, an' made me a chance ter work fur right good pay. I may say, in fact, that it was right good luck that I got the place I did!"

Dr. Blackstone gave Mrs. Roberson's arm a slight pressure. He thought he could discover a big joke in "Hugh Patrick's" words, but if the truth was known, he did not see half of the hidden points.

Electa and Joe stood hand in hand, and the afflicted woman was greatly pleased to meet one she knew was her devoted friend.

"You found the card we left upon the table, didn't you?" she resumed.

"Jes' so; yes."

"How do you like this Home?"

"Great place, ain't it?"

"You forget that I can't see," was Electa's evasive reply.

"So you can't."

"I will leave you, Mrs. Baldwin, to make known what I wanted of young Eldwin," interrupted Jason Blackstone.

The blind woman started.

"True, true!" she responded; "I had forgotten. Joseph, I am requested to sign a paper here, and I would like to have you read it aloud to me before I put down my name."

"Kerrect! I kin read English, an' I s'pose this ain't in no kelassical languish, is it?"

"All plain English," volunteered Blackstone. "Here is the document, my lad; read as directed."

He had drawn up a paper such as he believed a genuine charitable institution might have as a form of application for aid, if they had any; and it was so plainly written that Joe managed to read it. He made slow progress, however, and stumbled over some of the sonorous words, but it was not hard to follow him.

"That's all," he remarked, when he had reached the end.

"Do you object, Mrs. Baldwin, to signing that?" asked Jason, reproachfully.

"No, sir; and I hope you will excuse me if I have seemed obstinate—"

"Don't mention it, madam. You were somewhat set in your way, but I remember what you had to think of. One can't be too careful. Don't apologize! Now, here is the pen. You will please sign right there."

He guided her hand, and all was ready for the final act.

Unlucky Joe stood in a state of painful suspense. What was he to do? What could he do? He looked at Blackstone and saw a man twice his own weight. Certainly he could not overcome him. As for the signature, would it hold good in law? Mrs. Baldwin was blind; he could swear that she had been deceived—

"Thank you!" said Jason.

Joe stared in dismay. He had forgotten, in his worry and alarm, what a simple matter the signing of a name was to one accustomed to the pen. While he lost his presence of mind momentarily, the deed had been done.

Blackstone had placed before the blind woman a paper shaped exactly like the one from which the street waif had read, and Electa's hand had moved as directed.

She had signed the paper!

Speechless with consternation, Joe looked further. The paper signed by Electa had been folded into oblong shape, and the bogus one had been a close imitation. The latter had been laid back, folded, by Blackstone. He next folded the second.

"You are now entitled to all the aid and protection our Home can give you, Mrs. Baldwin," he said, blandly. "I think you will not find us negligent in the line of duty."

"Thank you, sir."

"The hour is now getting late, and we have our other patients to care for, so we will withdraw. You can, however, receive your young friend here, any day except Sunday, after two o'clock P. M."

"I shall be glad to see him. You will come, Joseph, won't you?"

The boy started.

"Yes."

It was a very brief answer, but Joe had something on his mind. The two documents, real and bogus, lay upon the table, separated widely enough so that a mistake was not likely to occur.

But was it not possible to cause a mistake?

It was in Joe's mind that if he could exchange one for the other, the dangerous one might yet be destroyed.

He could hardly give a moment's thought to Mrs. Baldwin, and his terse farewell, when she said more, brought a disappointed look to her face. She went to her room, however, and he flung another sentence after her:

"You kin rely upon me!"

"I know it, Joe."

Then the door closed behind her, and Mrs. Roberson locked it. Jason turned and poked the street-waif in the ribs.

"You're a sly rascal!" the doctor declared.

The "rascal" was slyer than Blackstone suspected. Naturally, the latter had watched Electa go, and, while he was thus occupied, Joe had neatly reversed the position of the documents on the table.

"I reckoned I could win yer money," replied Joe.

"You did nobly. Why, it almost seemed as if you actually were Joe Eldwin. I could hardly keep from laughing when you were fooling the woman so! She never 'tumbled,' but took it all in. Here's your double-X, my prize youth!"

And he passed over the promised reward.

"Thank'ee, sor," the recipient answered.

"All is now serene."

Doctor Jason was in high spirits. He took one of the folded papers and put it in his pocket without looking at its contents, and then advanced to the gas with the other. Holding it in the flame until it was well in the grasp of the destroying element, he then flung it into the stove, to burn at its leisure.

"So much for that," he observed, complacently.

Unlucky Joe drew a long breath. Events had taken a form more favorable than he had dared to hope for; Blackstone had not noticed that the two papers had been meddled with, and he had put the bogus, worthless one in his pocket, and burned up that which had Electa's signature.

The conspirators were ready to leave the room, and a motion from Mrs. Roberson caused Joe to go first.

She relocked the door of the first room, and, as they lingered in the hall and the street-waif went down the stairs slowly, he heard them speak further.

"The battle is won!" Mrs. Roberson declared.

"Gloriously won!" Jason added.

"You are sure her signature will stand in law?"

"I don't see why it should not."

"Then if we can keep her away from the world, we are on the top rung of the ladder of luck."

"Oh! we'll see to her. We have not gone thus far to make a failure now."

Joe dared not remain to overhear more. He had gone nearly to the foot of the stairs, and to linger there would be to arouse suspicion. He went on to the kitchen.

His recent victory did him a good deal of good, but he was not sanguine enough to think that the trick would remain undiscovered long. Jason would be likely to look for Electa's signature, and then he would see that he did not have it.

Sitting in the kitchen, Joe heard the voices of the female servants in a dim way, but without giving heed to what they said. They might have talked of anything from spring bonnets to the career of Artaxerxes, King of Persia, and he would have been none the wiser.

He was looking to the future of a greater responsibility.

He had saved Electa once, but as her doubts must have been greatly lessened by the events of the evening, it might be that she would thenceforth sign any and all papers presented to her.

This must be prevented, if possible; he must get speech with her. But how? Mrs. Roberson had the keys to the locked rooms, and it was madness to think of getting them out of her room while she slept.

Clearly, the only way was to act on the plan which had so often occurred to him, and try to ascend to Electa's window by means of a ladder.

He determined to try it.

At an early hour he retired to his room and

soon put out the light, but did not go to bed. Instead, he sat down by the window to wait for the whole house to grow silent and dark.

Unintentionally, he fell asleep at his post. It was midnight when he awoke. When he had ascertained this fact he saw that the time could not have been more favorable, and he arose and started to leave the house.

If he met with no obstacle, he would soon have his plan under way.

CHAPTER XIV.

JOE MAKES A BOLD MOVE.

DARKNESS and silence prevailed, and Unlucky Joe reached the back door without adventure or alarm. Opening it, he passed out into the yard. He was not so sure of his ability to get the ladder, for it was in the stable; the stable was locked, and Obed Mason, the coachman, slept there.

Joe, however, had studied the situation carefully before the night, and he thought that he could manage it.

He went to one end of the stable. A few feet above was a window, and this, as usual, was open. As there were places where he could use his hands and feet, he knew that he could climb up if he did not, by accident, make any betraying sound.

The attempt was begun.

He was light and strong, and he went up slowly, surely and carefully. He reached the window and entered.

There was then danger that Obed would hear him, but the ladder was close at hand, and he swung it around successfully and run it out of the window.

To descend was easy, and he was soon on the ground. He carried it to the alley, and then took a survey of the street.

He was well aware that there would be constant danger while the ladder was raised. If a patrolman, roundsman, or, in fact, any one, chanced to be passing and saw a ladder raised against the wall, it would cause an investigation which was likely to land him in the station-house.

Fortunately the street was a side-street, and there was but little travel at any time. When Joe looked out of the alley he could not see any person, which was encouraging, but he did not forget that the patrolman would be around on his beat soon—unless he was neglecting his duty.

Whether to wait for him to pass or not was a serious question, but as he did not appear, Joe decided to move at once and take the risk.

Going back, he raised the ladder and ascended hurriedly.

He reached the window; he looked in, but could see nothing; he rapped upon the glass.

It was not to be expected that he would secure immediate attention, and he was not disappointed that the rapping was made in vain. He repeated it, gradually increasing its key to sharpness. The sound seemed very loud to him; it made him nervous. What if some one else should hear it? There was no response from within the room.

After awhile he descended, went to the mouth of the alley and again reconnoitered. No one was to be seen.

He returned to the window, and using a pebble, rapped so sharply that every stroke made him shiver.

"I'll wind up in the Tombs, sartain sure!" he muttered. "S'pect I'll git off light on the plea o' first defense, but it'll be t'ree months, sure pop, an' where will Electa an' the chillun be w'en I come out? This 'ere thing is gettin' seriouser than roomatics o' de corporeal j'int! I reckon I'd better skip—"

A dark figure appeared at the other side of the window, and he was not slow to recognize Electa.

Forgetting for a moment that she was blind, he motioned to her. Then, perceiving the folly of pantomime, he again rapped. Apparently Mrs. Baldwin was perplexed and uncertain. If she had known that she was a prisoner she would have leaped to a conclusion, but having been led to believe the reverse, she could not understand.

Joe rapped again, and tried in vain to raise the window. He called Electa's name as loudly as he dared, but without result.

He began to get in a panic; affairs could not remain in this state a great while without drawing the attention of undesired observers.

Fortunately, a new actor appeared in the person of Electa's son, and he at once recognized his old friend, Joe. The boy called the name in a key so high that the street-waif was alarmed,

but Electa at once began to raise the window.

Joe stopped her as soon as he could get his arm through, and shook her hand warmly.

"It's me, Electa, but don't ye speak above a whisper. Thar's mischief up an' doin'!"

"What is it?" she breathed, in alarm.

"I've come to warn ye ag'in' the snakes you are with!"

"What about them?"

"They're yer worst inimies."

"How do you know?"

"'Cause I've shaddered them. This ain't no charitable Home, but you're a prisoner."

"A prisoner?"

"Jes' so."

"But they told me—"

"Don't you b'lieve a word they tells ye! I know them, an' they're yer bitterest foes. I've been workin' ag'in' them ever sence you was took here. Blackstone is a wolf in sheep's clothes. I've got a job in this house, an' my name is Flynn, an' they don't know me, but—"

"What of the paper I signed?" cried Electa, in alarm.

"Burnt up!"

"Are you sure?"

"Yes."

"What was it?"

"Don't know, only that it was a trick ter do you harm; but don't ye fear—it's burnt ter ashes. An' don't ye sign no more papers!"

"I will not, but what shall I do? If I am a prisoner, what may they not do to my children?"

"Brace up! Don't hev nary a fear, fur I will take keer o' you. Ever hear o' Joab Baldwin, yer husband's uncle?"

"I've heard Wilbur mention him, but know nothing about him."

"He's wid me. I run onter him by chance, an' he's a good 'un. He's j'ined hands with me, an', 'tween us, we're goin' ter git ye out. Don't ye be skeered, but just trust in me, Electa!"

"Heaven bless you, Joseph!"

"Can't stop no longer, fur ef me an' my ladder is seen hyar, thar will be the p'isonest diffikilty on record. I'll go, but remember I'm watchin' over ye, an' I'll beat 'em out."

"Joseph, you are very good—you are noble!"

"I'd resk my life fur you, Electa, 'caust you've been good ter me! Now, don't let 'em know you hev got onter their villainy, but jest fly light an' fool 'em. See?"

"Yes."

"Then I'm off!"

"I am all bewildered—"

"Can't stop ter explain: it's a meracle I hev been so long unmolested. Good-night, Electa!"

All this was said in very low tones, Joe never venturing to speak above a whisper, and there had been nothing to create alarm, but the alert street-boy was well aware that danger might come uninvited.

That it had come, he was soon made to see.

As he turned to descend the rungs he looked down, and, lo! at the foot of the ladder stood a policeman who was looking up at him.

The street-waif grew weak in the legs for a moment, for he knew that the guardian of the night could place but one construction upon what he saw.

"Hi!" growled the blue-coat, "w'ot ye doin' dere?"

"Fixin' the winder," replied Joe, at a desperate venture.

"Yes, you are! Foine toime to be doin' carpenter worrk, ain't it? You's a burglar! Come down out av that!"

"I'm busy."

"Oi'll make you's busier. Come down!"

"Can't. I've got the flat o' my trowsers ketched on ter a nail."

"Come down, Oi say, or Oi'll kim up an' try de afficks av me club on yer trowsers."

By that time Joe had recovered his presence of mind. He was in a fix, and he knew it, but it was plain that the case was one when even an innocent person had cause to fear the law. Whatever might be said for him by Electa, his enemies would swear his liberty and reputation away.

"I've got ter make a bolt, an' try ter beat 'em out. It's one chance in a hundred, but it may be my luck will change right here," thought the boy.

His plan was formed, and he moved down the ladder in compliance with the blue-coat's demand, but he did not intend to surrender. The policeman reached up for him, and, just then, Joe gave a light leap to one side and went shooting through the air.

CHAPTER XV.

PURSUED BY A POLICEMAN.

JOE's leap was made with all of the agility of youth, and he cleared the policeman perfectly. When he struck on the ground it made his teeth rattle, but he was like a machine on springs. Uninjured, he seemed to recoil from the ground, and then, before the surprised policeman could make a move, his coveted prey was darting away.

As the officer was next to the street, retreat in that direction was out of the question.

Joe did not try it.

Instead, he ran toward the stable, and, by the time the ponderous pursuer got in motion, the boy disappeared around the corner.

It now became a game of hide-and-seek. The stable stood clear both of other buildings and the yard-fence, and neither could enter as matters then stood.

The patrolman ran as far as the corner where he had last seen his prey, but, by that time, Joe had passed to the opposite end. The blue-coat retreated, and, going to the stable-door, began to hammer upon it with his club. Joe kept out of sight. It was not long before the pounding brought an answer. Obed opened the door.

"What's up?" he asked.

"Burglars!" gasped the policeman.

"Where?"

"Here!"

The speaker made a gesture which, in its swoop, took in half of New York.

"I don't see anybody but you!" observed Obed.

"There was four ave thim, an' Oi had a roight smart tussle, but b'ate thim over dhe head wid me club until dey run," explained the voracious blue-coat. "Wan is holdin' by de stable; whether there is anny more about Oi don't know."

"Wait, an' I'll help ye," the coachman volunteered.

He had thrown on his trousers, and now paused only to secure a club. Then he rejoined the other man-hunter.

"You go wan way, an' Oi'll go de other," directed the leader. "Now, at a trot!"

He set the example himself, and plunged ahead. As he turned the first corner he vaguely noticed a board leaned up against the foundation of the building at an angle, but gave it no further thought. Right there he made a mistake. No sooner had he passed than Unlucky Joe emerged from under the board, whisked around the corner and darted toward the back door of the house.

It was a race of no small importance.

If he could get inside without being seen, lock the door and get up-stairs, it would be hard to fix proof upon him. He had not been seen by Obed, and the corpulent patrolman had seen him only in the darkness.

Every moment he expected to hear a cry from one of his pursuers, but none came. He reached the door; he entered; he turned the key; he passed up-stairs as carefully as possible.

Once in his room he knelt down by the closed blinds and watched and listened.

Obed and the blue-coat were having a great time. They decided that the "burglars" must be in the stable, so they entered and devoted the next ten minutes in searching it. When they came out they knew that they were beaten men.

"They've got away!" lamented the officer.

"Looks that way, b'gosh!"

"Could they fly, d'ye think?"

"They seem to hev flown."

"Luck was ag'inst us; dat's just it—luck was dead ag'inst us. No use ter kick."

"Should say not," Obed agreed.

"Annyhow, they took away some roight sore heads wid thim. Wan ave dhe gang I knocked over stiff, an' all got a perfect shower ave blows, but what could wan officer do wid foive toughs?"

"I thought you said four, before?"

"Oi didn't count de wan Oi knocked silly," the blue-coat explained, with great dignity. "Annyhow, no damage is done; Oi nabbed thim jist as de first wan was goin' up de ladder."

"The mistress will pay ye well, no doubt."

The policeman took Obed by the button.

"Oi'm not a blackmailer," he asserted, "an' niver want extra pay for doin' me duty. Now, why should we make anny fuss about this? If we do, Oi shall have to spind a w'ake runnin' to de Polace Court, loikely; an' you may get sint to de House av Detention fur three months, perhaps."

"The House o' Correction!" gasped Obed.

"No. Oi said de House av Detention, which

is a place where dey k'ape witnesses so nobody can get at thim to bribe thim. Do yez want that dose?"

"Great Cicero! no; I don't!"

"Then you an' me have got to hould our tongues, an' it's all simple enough. Nobody has seen or heard us, an' de six burglars—Oi m'ane foive—won't tell av it. Now, to save ourselves trouble, why not we k'ape mum about the whole affair? No burglary was done, ye know. Why not hould our p'ace?"

"I ought to tell my mistress."

"So ye want three months in de House av Detention?" asked the blue-coat, with sarcasm.

"No, I don't!"

"Well?"

"Your way is right. I ain't no fool, and I'm with yer. Not a word will I say."

"Good! Shake!"

They clasped hands, while Joe Eldwin was almost unable to credit his good fortune. He clearly saw that the patrolman was ashamed of his failure and did not like to report it, but this did not concern the street-waif; he would be the greatest gainer if the men held their tongues, for he could not be suspected by Mrs. Roberson and Blackstone of what was not known to them.

The ladder was replaced in the stable; the patrolman remained for awhile in friendly, affable conversation with Obed; then he rolled his ponderous form toward the street. At the alley he turned and spoke again:

"Oi doubt if d'ere is another man on de foorce dat could have done up seven burglars—Oi m'ane six—as n'ately as Oi did!"

And then he went his way with the proud step of one who fees himself entitled to share in the glories of Alexander, Napoleon and Wellington.

Obed stood for some time, meditated, looked around uneasily, and then shook his head and returned to the stable.

Joe went to bed feeling that it would be a misnomer to call himself "Unlucky" Joe any longer. Both in this latest adventure and in the scene in Mrs. Baldwin's room he had been strangely favored by fortune, and he was confident that he could hope that the demon of ill luck had been driven away from him.

He fell asleep in a very happy mood.

The next morning there was no evidence of disturbance. Neither Mrs. Roberson nor her servants mentioned that they had been disturbed, or had heard suspicious sounds during the night. There was a trace of inquiry in the gaze which Obed bent upon "Hugh Patrick Flynn," and he had not failed to think of the boy in connection with the affair—he was not yet done worrying because he had so rashly "recommended" him—but what could the coachman do except believe the boy innocent?

Hugh Patrick was already in the house—why should the burglars, if allies of the youth, take such a laborious way of entering?

On the other hand, Obed was not sure but the policeman had concocted the whole affair to make cheap capital for himself; so Mr. Mason did not let the adventure weigh upon his mind.

Nothing of importance occurred during the day. Joe, however, was kept so busy that he did not get any chance to call upon Joab Baldwin. In the evening there were no demands upon him, and when he asked leave of Mrs. Roberson to go out, the request was granted.

He went, but did not call upon Joab at once. He found something else of interest.

By chance he discovered two men on the street, and the moment that he saw them he was all attention. They were Doctor Blackstone and John Graves, the unscrupulous detective.

Almost immediately after he discovered them they entered a saloon, and, as they did not come out as soon as he expected, he determined to make a bold movement and see what they were about.

He entered the saloon.

The first persons he saw were Blackstone and Graves. They had taken seats at a table, and were slowly drinking beer.

Joe took in the arrangement of the room at once. He longed for a friendly screen which would be a means of concealment to him, but none was to be seen. He determined to make a bold move, and trust to the semi-darkness to save him from detection. Just then a newsboy on the street called the names of the papers he was trying to dispose of, and Joe turned back, bought the newsboy out entirely, and then entered the saloon.

Being afraid that, on account of his youth, he would not be allowed in the saloon, he had adopted a well-considered device.

He sat down near the two men, with his back

toward them, and made a pretense of counting the small coins he had in his pocket.

"Since you've got it down so fine," were the first words he heard, and these from Blackstone, "I will admit that I am working the raffle you name."

"You'll get left!" Graves declared.

"How do you know?"

"All of your time is being thrown away. There is a certain person living whose existence renders all your work vain."

"Not Wilbur Baldwin?" Jason asked, in alarm.

"No; he's lifeless enough."

"Who is the person then?"

CHAPTER XVI.

A BATCH OF ARRESTS.

UNLUCKY JOE listened eagerly for the reply. He saw that there was a sort of armed neutrality, as it were, between Blackstone and Graves. Evidently, the bogus detective had forced himself upon Dr. Jason, and the latter had consented to amicable relations, on the surface, simply because he was afraid of the alleged professional blackmailer.

Graves smiled wisely.

"Can't you surmise who the man is?" he asked.

"No," Blackstone replied.

"You are stupid!"

"Possibly. However, give me the name."

"Who should it be but your worthy brother?"

"What! not Joab?"

"Joab it is."

"Alive!"

"Very lively."

"Why, I was told that he died over a year ago."

"You were wrongly informed then. Joab Baldwin lives, is well, hearty and active—most infernally active!" commented Graves, viciously, as he thought of his experience with the philosopher and Nebuchadnezzar. "Hence, you see that you will have to recast all of your scheme."

Dr. Jason growled several words which may as well be left to the imagination. He was chagrined, dismayed and angry, and he found a strong way of expressing it.

"I thought that fellow was out of the way."

"He's alive and active, as I said before."

Darker became Graves's scowl, and Joe wished that the man was still in the cage, guarded by Nebuchadnezzar.

"Does he know—"

"Not a thing," Graves interrupted; "and therein lies our hope. You have some influence, Carlos?"

"Yes."

"Then let us join hands, and we'll beat Joab out and win the stake. You have heard, of course, of the old Zeno Dorr murder. Now, I think Joab did that job"—here the detective winked humorously—"and we'll get out a warrant and have him arrested."

"It won't do for me to appear."

"Of course not. You must keep in the background; Joab must not suspect that you are alive; but I want your co-operation."

"I'm with you!" Blackstone agreed.

"Then let us get the warrant at once. The case is old, and we must take all possible precautions, you know."

Blackstone arose.

"Lead the way!" he directed.

And the knavish pair left the saloon.

Joe Eldwin did not linger. There was fresh danger for the philosopher, although Joe did not believe that his latest home had been discovered. He hastened toward Joab's room, and found the latter in.

"Ha! so it's you!" growled the little old man.

"Any news? Tongue! tongue!"

"That's an awful pile o' news. Graves is goin' ter arrest ye!"

"The knave! But let him work; I believe he killed Zeno Dorr, and it may come out in the investigation. Anything more?"

"Jason Blackstone is ter help him, but I don't b'lieve his real name is that nor Hedderson. Did yer ever know anybody named Carlos?"

"What?" cried Joab, with a great start.

"Carlos. I didn't hear no more."

The philosopher gazed blankly at the speaker. "Carlos!" he muttered. "Carlos Baldwin, alive!"

"Is his name Baldwin, too?"

"Describe the man! Tongue!" almost shouted the shipmaker.

Joe hastened to give a description as minute

as he could make it. Joab's excitement increased.

"Alive! alive!" he muttered.

"Who is he?"

"Who, but my brother! Brother! No; I scorn to call him that. Wilbur's father and I were full-brothers; Carlos was our half-brother, the son of an adventuress who ensnared our aged father. Carlos inherited all of her evil qualities, did many dishonest things, was cast off by us, and disappeared many years ago. I had long regarded him as dead. But why should he scheme against Wilbur's widow? There is not a dollar in the family, I may say, for him to get hold of, with all his arts."

"He didn't know you was alive, but Graves told him, and said the fact upset all of his schemes ag'in' Electa; an' Carlos admitted it. I got the idee that, you bein' alive, he must work ag'in' you, not ag'in' Electa, ter 'complish his ends."

"Strange! strange!" Joab muttered. "I haven't five hundred dollars to my name, and there is not, and never was, a rich relative from whom I could inherit anything."

"Thar must be."

"And I know there is not!"

"Then it is most peccoliar."

"But, come! tell me all that has happened since I saw you."

Joe obeyed, and gave a graphic history of the signing of the paper by Electa and its destruction; his night-adventure with the policeman, and what he had heard in the saloon.

"You are a trump!" the philosopher declared, "and if this tangle is ever straightened out, you will be deserving of all the good your friends can do you. Your unselfish devotion to Electa's interests is admirable, and you shall not lack for friends."

"I begin ter think my ill-luck has deserted me," hopefully remarked the street-waif.

"Deserted you! We'll make it fly out of the door as soon as we get the conspirators downed. 'Unlucky' Joe you shall be no longer, I declare."

So saying, the philosopher shook the boy's hand warmly.

"You and I will stick to each other," he added. "I like your style, and even an old hulk like me may be of some service to a bright boy. I like your style, and we'll continue messmates. United we stand; divided—well, we might fall, but don't want to. Now, we must take measures to get at our enemies. I am safe here, but I can't work to advantage, so it's no real gain if Graves don't know where my new room is—"

He paused as the door unceremoniously opened, and Joe felt cold chills start into action along his person as he recognized John Graves.

The detective blackmailer was smiling and triumphant.

"Oh, no, Graves don't know where you are!" he sneered.

Joab was silent. He was cornered. Back of Graves was another man, but he was a stranger; Jason Blackstone had wisely kept out of sight.

Graves flourished a paper.

"A warrant for your arrest," he added.

"On what charge?" Joab asked, steadily.

"For murdering Zeno Dorr."

"Do you mean to press that charge?"

"Yes."

"I advise you not to."

"Oh! do you threaten?"

"I notify you that justice generally triumphs in the end. Take you warning!"

"Cheap talk! But we stray from the point. I have a warrant for your arrest on the charge specified, and I propose to escort you to Police Headquarters. When a requisition has been granted, you will be taken to New Jersey for the crime done at Weehawken. Zeno Dorr shall be avenged!"

"Right—he shall!"

These words came in a stern voice behind Graves, and he wheeled to see who was thus interfering with him. When he saw he grew almost deathly pale.

"You here!" he gasped.

"Yes, John Graves. Once more I step between you and your prey, and this time it will be a final downfall for you. Ever since you became a detective you have disgraced the profession. You have been worse than the criminals you have caught, now and then, while your chief business has been to blackmail honest folks!"

"Sir, you—you are mistaken," faltered Graves.

"Useless, sir; useless. This time you fall entirely. You charge this man with having killed Zeno Dorr. Know, you, that the truth is out!

You and an ally killed Dorr—the circumstances make it murder in the second degree. Your confederate is dead, but he left a sworn statement signed and witnessed by several honest men. You are done, Graves!"

The discomfited villain stood speechless.

The new-comer turned to Graves's companion.

"Brookleng, do you train with such men?" was the stern inquiry.

"Indeed, sir, I know nothing about Graves, or the case," was the frightened reply. "He called upon me for help and I gave it."

"I believe you. You have handcuffs, I see. Put them upon Graves!"

The latter was utterly demoralized, and he made no resistance while the irons were being adjusted. Then the new master of events turned to the philosopher.

"Allow me to ask your name, sir," he said.

"It is Baldwin."

"Baldwin! What else?"

"Joab."

"Not the ex-sailor, frontiersman and circus-performer?"

"The same, sir."

The previous speaker smiled.

"You will confer a favor upon us, and greatly aid yourself, by going with me."

"Where?"

"To see a person, the sight of whom will surprise you. You hesitate! Well, it is not right, nor have I any reason for keeping you in the dark. I am—"

And the man of power mentioned a name known in detective circles throughout all New York.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE PLOT REVEALED.

AN hour later a hack paused in front of a house on Charles street. It contained Joab, Unlucky Joe and the representative of the detective force. Graves had been taken to Police Headquarters, and our friends were still in charge of the detective in a friendly way.

Joab had told him about Electa's trouble, and he had listened attentively.

"I have heard a part of this before," he remarked, but refused to say who had been his informant.

Reaching Charles street he had the vehicle stopped at a certain point; then, bidding Joab and Joe follow, he went to the house and rung the bell. The servant who answered the summons at once stepped back for him to enter. They entered the parlor.

A gentleman came forward to meet them, but paused suddenly.

Then Joe Eldwin became aware that something unusual was occurring.

Joab and the stranger were staring at each other blankly, strangely. But the silence was soon broken. Each uttered a cry; they rushed to meet each other; the philosopher clasped the stranger in his arms.

"My boy! my boy!" he murmured.

Joe Eldwin turned a puzzled gaze upon the detective.

"Uncle and nephew," the officer explained.

"What nephew?"

"Wilbur Baldwin!"

And then it was Joe's turn to be dumfounded. His mouth opened widely, and his eyes were very big as he looked again at the stranger.

"But he's dead!" the boy muttered.

"Not dead, but alive!" Joab shouted. "Hurrah! my eaglet of the sea, the salt waves don't cover you yet, bless Neptune!"

"Not yet, and I hope they never will!" was the hearty reply. "Old Neptune may be all right, but I've had enough of him. Once let me find my wife and children, and I'll sail the ocean no more."

Joab wheeled, caught Joe's hand, placed it in that of the stranger and cried:

"Here he is!—here's Electa's husband, alive and well; and here's the boy that saved your wife from conspirators' hands."

"Electa! Do you know where she is?" Wilbur Baldwin demanded, eagerly.

"Ay, ay! This lad can show you."

"Then I'm his friend for life!"

"It's all right, Baldwin," interrupted the detective. "Follow us, and, thanks to Master Joe, you shall see your family again."

Wilbur caught Joe up as though he had been an infant.

"Hurrah!" he exclaimed; "the sun breaks through the clouds, and the old ship isn't a hulk yet. Go, go! Lead the way to my wife and babies!"

This was said with the bluff, hearty emphasis

of a sailor, but Wilbur plainly had nobler qualities. Joe was wonderfully impressed with him.

The street-waif was bewildered, and did not recover his wits until he found himself in the carriage with the three men, and on the way to Mrs. Robertson's. Then he listened eagerly to Wilbur's story.

"The Ocean Beauty did founder," said the sailor, "but half a dozen of us were taken off by another ship. She was on a long voyage, and we had to go with her, which explains my prolonged absence. I wrote home once from a port, but my letter seems not to have reached my wife."

"Among our crew was one man who died, but before he went under, he confessed that he and John Graves killed Zeno Dorr, the miser of Weehawken. You and I remember that case, Uncle Joab, though it did not concern us."

"It has concerned me seriously of late."

"Never mind; your troubles are over. As soon as I reached New York I told the police of the confession, and Graves is nabbed. I've been here a fortnight, and I've tried every means to find Electa and you, but all in vain."

"It's all right now, my boy."

"All but her blindness," added Wilbur, gravely.

"Perhaps that can be cured; such things do happen at times."

The carriage reached Mrs. Robertson's. All alighted, and the detective rung the bell.

As chance would have it, Mrs. Robertson and Carlos Baldwin, alias Blackstone, were then in the hall, and the latter opened the door.

The unwelcome visitors entered without ceremony.

Blackstone first looked angry, but catching sight of Joab, became a victim to consternation.

"You here!" he gasped.

"I'm here, and your race is run!" was the philosopher's sturdy reply.

"What knaves are these?" demanded Mrs. Robertson, imperiously.

"Those who bring ruin to you. I am a detective, and hereby arrest you and Blackstone!" the officer declared.

"Upon what charge?"

"Gently, madam! You see your ally has nothing to say. Know you that these men are Joab Baldwin, and Wilbur, husband of Electa Baldwin!"

Mrs. Robertson recoiled.

"Ruined!" she whispered, turning white.

The detective did not know how desperate Blackstone might be, and he improved the chance to iron the conspirator at once.

Mrs. Robertson rallied, and tried to play a bluff game, but the detective heeded her but little. He took possession of her keys.

"Our young sailor must be impatient," the officer then said. "Joe, I leave it to you to go up and prepare his wife for the good news. Tell her gradually and carefully, or serious consequences may follow."

"Make haste," added Wilbur, quickly.

And Joe went up-stairs.

Blackstone resisted desperately when an attempt was made to search his pockets, but the officer believed that some evidence might be found there, and persisted. Several papers and letters were found, and they were looked over at once. The detective soon struck the clew.

"Mr. Baldwin," he said, addressing Joab, "were you ever in Wisconsin?"

"I was there two years."

"Did you buy any land?"

"Yes, and lost it. Another man and I bought a section, half-and-half, but other parties sued us, alleging that the man from whom we bought had no good title, and we lost in court."

"Your fellow-purchaser has since reopened the case and won, and your half awaits your demand. More than that, its value has increased enormously; your old partner says the whole section will sell for fifty thousand dollars. You can figure out what your half will be!"

Joab was silent with surprise.

The detective turned to Blackstone.

"Your plot is plain," he observed. "If Joab had been dead, as you thought he was, you and Wilbur would be equal heirs. But you thought Wilbur dead, too, and schemed to get the whole. Just what paper you tried to make Electa sign I don't know, but it is plain that you were trying to beat her and her children out of their share. You are beaten, and Joab and Wilbur are both alive. Joab, you can't be proud of your brother, here!"

The philosopher made a gesture of loathing.

"Don't use the word 'brother!' His many

misdeemeanors disgusted us all many years ago, and, when he disappeared, we were glad of it." Joe Eldwin entered the parlor.

"Wilbur's in with Electa an' the chillun," was his simple announcement.

Half an hour later the house was left in charge of the servants.

Blackstone and Mrs. Roberson were taken away prisoners by the officer.

Wilbur insisted that Joab and Joe should accompany him, Electa and the children to his rooms, and all were glad to go. The street-waif alone hesitated for a moment.

"We will not take 'No' for an answer!" Wilbur declared. "I owe too much to you, my brave youth, to lose sight of you. From this time you shall share my fortunes, and my home shall be your home. Your noble devotion to my loved ones entitles you to all that gratitude and money can do for you!"

A year later.

Carlos, *alias* Dr. Blackstone and Mrs. Roberson were in prison, serving a sentence as long as could be given them. They proved to be husband and wife, and old schemers and law-breakers.

Whether "Mrs. Roberson" read the book on poisons because she had evil designs on any one, was never learned.

John Graves received a life sentence for his crime. Holland, also, went to Sing Sing.

Mr. McFagan drank himself into an un-honored grave.

Wilbur and his family, with Joab and Joe Eldwin—"Unlucky Joe" no longer—went to the Wisconsin property, where they are living in comfortable circumstances. The philosopher took Nebuchadnezzar and his miniature ships along. The latter are to be seen in the new home, but the tiger has gone the way of all earth.

Electa's blindness was cured by a skillful doctor, and all is happiness in the home.

Joe is one of the family, honored, ambitious and lucky, and a successful career is prophesied for him by his grateful friends.

THE END.

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